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The New Science Wars

Radical differences in the humanities and sciences haven't gone away — they've intensified.



Ellen Weinstein for The Chronicle

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The relationship between the humanities and the sciences, including some quarters of the social sciences, has become strained, to put it mildly. Developments in cognitive neuroscience and other fields — from sophisticated brain-imaging techniques to increasingly detailed knowledge of human

genetics — promise to revolutionize our knowledge of human behavior. And these changes have propelled a new, more hard-edged round in the science wars. In 2002, Steven Pinker, in his best-selling *The Blank Slate*, chastised the humanities for presenting culture as a malleable product of human will. While the first science wars, fought in the 1990s, focused on broad questions regarding the basis of scientific knowledge, today science warriors accuse the humanities of ignoring human nature, and especially natural human differences.

These controversies could potentially illuminate core moral and political questions about the nature of scholarship, humanistic and otherwise. Yet, as with so many dysfunctional relationships, partisans of each side think they are having a conversation without really talking to each other at all. Take the dust-up that began when *Slate*'s chief political correspondent, Jamelle Bouie, wrote about the historical connection between race and the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Bouie was responding to recent critics of the humanities, most notably Pinker, whose *Enlightenment Now* provides a rousing call for us to use science to improve the human condition. Against Pinker's idea of the Enlightenment as a model for rational problem-solving today, Bouie pointed out that many Enlightenment thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant, helped forge modern notions of racial classification and hierarchy. It's not so simple a task, then, to just draw on the Enlightenment ideal of rational progress. We must also, Bouie argued, confront Enlightenment ideals' continued entanglement with racism and European imperial ideology.

Bouie's critics pointed out that, from the perspective of Pinker's scientific, problem-solving Enlightenment, it is hardly surprising that past thinkers

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should fail to live up to their own ideals, subject as they are to cognitive biases like ethnocentrism and "in-group" prejudice. Rather than dwell on the distinctiveness of modern racial ideology, these critics say, we should use psychological findings to ameliorate built-in ethnocentric reflexes and enhance people's openness to others. We should social-engineer our

way out of racism.

This is where the conversation breaks down. Both sides think they are talking about the same thing — the Enlightenment — but in fact they are disagreeing about a more fundamental question: how we should study action, and ideas, in the first place. While scientific approaches to human behavior call attention to transhistorical mechanisms underlying, say, ethnocentrism, humanistic scholarship, at its best, tries to understand the nature of the reasons through which people justify their actions — and how those reasons unfold in history.

These perspectives are drastically different and give rise to rival visions of the relationship between scholarship and politics. For many defenders of scientific approaches to human behavior, science requires suspending our moral judgments in pursuit of dispassionate objectivity. But that can't be the ideal of the humanities. There is a moral concern at the core of humanistic research, one that cannot be extricated by appeals to objectivity.

The humanities draw on the human concern for moral and political values, which differs from the sort of objectivity often prized in the social sciences. Rocks and atoms don't "try to make or do anything worth making or doing," Wayne Booth wryly observed in his reflection on the ethics of literature. We can therefore describe them without passing judgment about whether what they are doing is worth doing. But "whenever our descriptions reveal intentions, however obscurely, they will be caught up in the world of values." The core task of humanistic scholarship is to understand how groups and individuals, throughout history, have made moral sense of their habits, practices, and choices. And in trying to understand those reasons we cannot help but pass moral and political judgment on them.

Because humanistic efforts rely implicitly on judgments about values, the humanities have a very different relationship to the political world than the sciences. Inevitably, they focus on transforming the reasons people do things — the sorts of justifications that they can offer — and not just on aggregate outcomes or underlying psychological mechanisms.

Another way to think about the difference is this: When we confront a problem like racism, is it best to try to alter people's incentives and massage their psychological biases? Or does solving the problem require some apportioning of blame and responsibility? From a humanistic perspective, we care not just about the underlying psychological reflexes but about the reasons — the self-interpretations, the justifications, and the emotional and

rhetorical investments — that buttress racial hierarchies, especially as they get embodied in clusters of ideas, such as those of the Enlightenment, that in other ways we find laudable. We do not just want to change people's reflexes. We want to change people's reasons and beliefs. Social change is only possible through analyses, such as those highlighted by Bouie, that call attention to moral blindness and self-contradiction.

Because it dwells on these historically specific phenomena, humanistic inquiry is equipped to understand the contours of human experience and activity in a way the sciences cannot. The stance of humanistic inquiry is one of dialogue with its subjects — an imaginary one, of course, but one full of chastisement and support. In Stephen Greenblatt's well-known phrase, humanistic scholarship springs from "the desire to speak with the dead." Scholars are interested in how people understood themselves, how they interacted with their cultural worlds, how they negotiated their everyday lives. At the core of the humanities is the attempt to enter into distant worlds and to see their connection to us.

Because it rests on this act of imaginative judgment, humanistic scholarship can never suspend or escape the particular perspective of the researcher. To understand someone's reasons for doing something, we are, to some extent, always imagining how we would act under similar

Moral concern is at the core of humanistic research.

circumstances. As a result, humanistic approaches can never fully embrace the ideal of pure scientific objectivity. Nor would they want to. The humanities cannot help but view humans as morally responsible agents. We are interested not just in why people do something, but in the reasons they themselves give. Interpreting our actions through the lens of the justifications we provide, a humanistic account passes some judgment on those justifications. We want to know the reasons people do things so we can reflect on whether our current reasons are good reasons.

Scientific approaches, on the other hand, feed off the disjunctions between our avowed reasons and more objectively discernible motives, between our experience of the world and the invisible causes that we hide from ourselves. This capacity to observe ourselves has been revolutionized by the development of technical instruments that enable us to divorce observation from the mundane world of conversation and interaction. Hannah Arendt, in her reflections on the nature of modern science, emphasized how new tools, from the telescope to the modern laboratory, enabled scientists to step out of their immersion in their day-to-day lives and observe things from an Archimedean point. Objectivity, here, is not so much an ideal to strive for as the inevitable result of viewing the world as a set of objects.

What about when the humanities borrow or embrace theories that do make claims to scientific objectivity? Movements such as psychoanalysis and Marxism have had an enduring influence on humanistic scholarship. At their best, such theories are efforts to account for the failure of individuals and groups to live up to their own moral ideals, efforts to understand how humans are capable of moral agency

and responsibility as well as of violence, cruelty, and oppression. But there is a risk involved in using such theories, as they have too often pushed humanistic analyses away from the texture of human self-understanding and toward mechanistic and reductive arguments.

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A humanistic discipline housed in the social science of political science, my field, political theory, can never fully embrace either of these competing ways of viewing the political world. Political theory evolves out of the long tradition of critical and moral reflection on politics. We are trained to see the

political world as full of competing values and ideals as well as domination and power.

Political science as a social science is a post-war achievement, one whose identity was often established in opposition to more traditional modes of philosophical reflection. Political scientists justified themselves against the specter of moral instruction. But it is very hard to get the phenomena that interest us into focus without invoking concepts and language that carry the traces of that older mode of moral critique. Political theorists carry on because the analysis of politics and the exercise of moral judgment are impossible to disentangle.

A strange paradox of the sciences of ourselves is that we can always invalidate some findings by changing our habits, beliefs, and actions. Democracies persist because of shared beliefs about the justifiability of democratic regimes. Political actors act, not just because of their interests or desires, but because of conflicting beliefs about how the world ought to appear. Scientific techniques can inform but not settle such controversies.

It's a two-way street. Humanistic scholars should be interested in objective accounts of how the world works, especially insofar as the aggregate effects of human action outrun the beliefs and intentions of individuals. The humanities can enrich our sense of what matters. But to answer the perennial question — what is to be done? — demands social-scientific analysis. Political theory is at its best when it draws on the findings of political scientists to understand how to realize irreducibly normative concepts like democratic representation or political equality. Similarly, a humanistic analysis of how, for example, the ideals of the Enlightenment were mobilized in defense of racism can make us sensitive to how easily objectivity can itself mask a partial perspective.

We should not forget that our capacity to observe and predict, to become scientists of ourselves, is ultimately rooted in our conversations with each other about what we care about and want to change. As the sciences, bolstered by ever-more precise varieties of psychological and cognitive-scientific investigation, develop increasingly powerful tools to make sense of the forces that shape the world, the humanities stand ready to remind us of the competing moral ends that orient our endeavors — as well as our responsibility to reflect on those ends and who they serve.

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