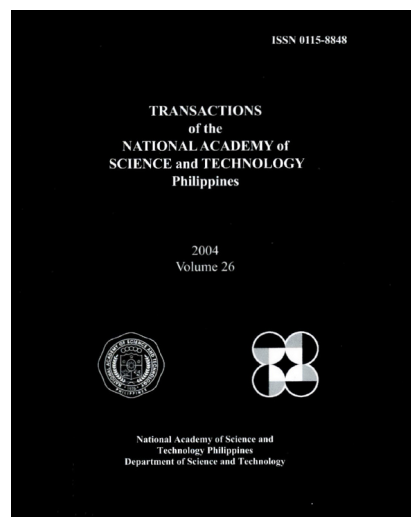


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## The Humanities in Our Intellectual and Cultural Life

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### Citation

Dalisay JY Jr. 2004. The humanities in our intellectual and cultural life. Transactions NAST PHL 26(2): 192-201. [doi.org/10.57043/transnastphl.2004.4697](https://doi.org/10.57043/transnastphl.2004.4697)

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## THE HUMANITIES IN OUR INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

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### Abstract

Forty-five years after C.P. Snow's famous and contentious lecture at Cambridge on "The Two Cultures," of the humanists and scientists, we continue to suffer, not so much from this dichotomy in our ways of thinking, but rather from their shared subservience in this country to a third "culture," the culture of politics, of base survival and self-interest from the lowest to the highest levels of our government and society.

If our critical faculties were truly at work, the Filipino humanist should have no trouble concluding that the way forward – culturally and economically – can only be led by a greater awareness and application of science in our national life, especially in our education.

But rational decisions like this are held back by the supervening claims of politics, which are neither humanist nor scientific, and by a naïve and retrograde conception of science and humanities as options – mutual exclusivity, and bordering on frivolous – rather than imperatives.

The humanities, in particular, are often taken for a little more than entertainment, a belletristic indulgence devoid of rigor and practical significance.

The question to ask should really not be where the humanities might be located in our intellectual and cultural life – something for which I suspect we already know the answers – but rather where intellect and culture belong in our national consciousness.

**Keywords:** third culture, humanities, cultural life, science

It is a commonplace—practically a cliché—to say that our lives, and certainly our learning, would not be complete without some appreciation of the humanities. Our

tradition of liberal education has primed us to the necessity of cultivating the “well-rounded individual” schooled in the basics of various disciplines. At the University of the Philippines, and in many other leading universities, we take this as an article of faith, and I see little need for belaboring the point of why a balanced education is a good thing.

But all the same, let me address the subject by way of introducing other related and somewhat broader subjects: the relationship between science and the humanities in our country and culture, including politics and governance, and the position and the promotion of science within our national culture.

### **First, what exactly do we mean by “the humanities”?**

A typical definition of the humanities (employed by the writing program of Colorado State University [1]) describes them as “the branches of learning (such as philosophy or languages) that investigate human constructs and concerns, as opposed to natural processes.... [They] have the overall goal of the exploration and explanation of human experience.... In most disciplines in the humanities, written texts are extremely important, especially in history, philosophy, and literature. Historians attempt a systematic documentation and analysis of events related to a particular people, country, or period. Literary authors and artists attempt to capture for others their own human experiences and understanding of the world. The humanities involve inquiry into consciousness, values, ideas, and ideals as they seek to describe how experiences shape our understanding of the world.”

### **Second, why are the humanities important?**

Again I will turn to conventional wisdom and quote what should already be obvious, from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities [2]:

“The humanities enrich and ennoble us, and their pursuit would be worthwhile even if they were not socially useful. But in fact, the humanities are socially useful. They fulfill vitally important needs for critical and imaginative thinking about the issues that confront us as citizens and as human beings; reasoned and open-minded discussion of the basic values that are at stake in the various policies and practices that are proposed to address these issues; understanding and appreciating the experiences of others, and the ways in which the issues that confront us now have been understood in other times, places, and cultures.

“The humanities concern themselves with the complete record of human experience—exploring, assessing, interpreting, and refining it, while at the same time adding to it. We need the humanities. Without them we cannot possibly govern ourselves wisely or well.”

What strikes me here is the word “govern,” which seems to me to be of utmost importance to us at this juncture of our history, and which is key to our topic today. The role of the humanities in our intellectual and cultural life is to enable us to govern ourselves wisely and well. They deal with issues and value judgments, with defining the commonalities and differences of human experience, hopefully toward an affirmation of our most positive human traits, such as the need to work together as families, communities, and societies. In sum, they help us agree on a common stake, based on which we can make plans, make decisions, and take action.

To move into a somewhat more slippery area, the humanities presuppose and are invariably bound up with the promotion of what we call culture.

In an essay titled “‘The Only Responsible Intellectual Is One Who Is Wired,’” John M. Unsworth [3] refers to the critic Raymond Williams who observed how “culture” started out as a verb before becoming a noun. The verb returns us to the Latin root, *colere*, meaning “to inhabit, cultivate, protect,” leading to derivatives like “colony” and “cuture.”

Unsworth adds, quoting Williams, that “The modern sense of the word ‘culture’ as an independent, abstract noun describing ‘the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity’ does not become common until the mid-19th century, developing slowly and... organically from the original meaning of cultivating natural resources.”

Indeed, Williams reaches much farther back to John Milton, who (in the revised version of his 1660 essay on “The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth”) wrote of spreading “much more Knowledg and Civility, yea, Religion, through all parts of the Land, by communicating the natural heat of Government and Culture more distributively to all extreme parts, which now lie num and neglected.”

Unsworth notes that culture and government are allied by this idea, “yoked to the idea of education as an instrument of social control.” It is culture and government that will reach out and bring their “natural heat” to bear on the numb and neglected extremities of the body politic.

This view of government and culture working together as a therapeutic agent is interesting, precisely because it highlights what we seem to lack—especially in this aftermath of one of the most divisive elections in our history. Despite all the predictable rhetoric (and the real need) for national reconciliation, we find it difficult to reconcile beyond short-term political expediency because we remain unable to agree on our most common ideals—the national dream, as it were, or the direction of the national narrative. What is our story? Who is its hero? Are we looking at an unfolding tragedy, a realist drama, or a romantic myth?

I ask these by way of suggesting that one of culture’s aims and ways of healing—of assuaging the momentary pains of political separation and material want—should be to remind us of something larger and worthier than ourselves, something worth living and dying for, like God, family, and country. This is a reminder that the

humanities—the academic fount of culture—can deliver, and this is the contribution it can make to the forging of a national culture that will embody and promote a hierarchy of shared values and concerns.

**What is important to us as a people? Where do we want to go? What price are we willing to pay to get there?**

It will be the humanities that will provide that vision, in all its clarities and ambiguities; and it will be science and technology that will provide the means.

This does not mean that scientists and technologists will have little or nothing to contribute to the crafting of this vision; I firmly believe scientists should, and that one of our worst weaknesses has been the fact that we have left national policy to the politicians, the preachers, the lawyers, the merchants, and the journalists.

The recent elections and our experience with surveys demonstrated the deep discomfort and mistrust with which many of us continue to receive the fruits of science. It is a suspicion, of course, bred of ignorance, but it offers plaintive proof of how far we need to go to propagate a culture of science in this country.

Ours is an appallingly innumerate society. Most of us do not know the simplest numbers that describe our lives, and much less what they mean. We are raised on concepts like the national flower and the national bird and the national tree, but even in college we are hard put to say what the national population, the national birth rate, or the Gross National Product is. Our notion of culture consists of pretty images, pleasant melodies, dramatic gestures, and desirable objects—certainly not puzzling or disturbing numbers.

It is possible that most of us see numbers, especially big ones, as irrelevant to our lives because we feel so small and so alone. What does a trillion-peso debt matter to those who can barely make P200 a day?

Science, of course, is more than numbers. I would like to see it as a belief in a natural order of things and in the efficacy of the process by which that order can be limned and understood. This viewpoint or method is even more difficult to introduce and to embed in public policy or governance, and in its mirror in the public sensibility and imagination. Public debates—even on matters of public health or safety, such as those that have to do with contraception, AIDS, GMOs, incinerators, nuclear energy—are often driven not by the scientific facts, or their rational interpretation, but by political, religious, and economic considerations.

This is not to say that political, religious, and economic considerations are non-essential; to the contrary, they apply the values by which we define ourselves as individuals and as human communities to the issues at hand. Indeed there will be a point when political or moral standards must prevail to preserve a measure of social order, even as we understand that these standards will keep changing over time. But the decisions we make as a people and our own collective intelligence can only improve if they were informed and enhanced by the knowledge available to science.

I neither mean to imply that science is a fixed star, an immutable monolith, or, God forbid, a religion unto itself. Again—often thanks to ignorance—it is easy to push science to an extreme where it acquires a malevolent aspect. Our deep-seated fears of uncontrollably mutant micro-organisms, of nuclear annihilation, of science gone amuck, are presaged in that body of medieval lore called Faustiana, having to do with the legendary Dr. Faust, the prototypical mad scientist who sold his soul in exchange for the key to the mysteries of knowledge. Faust would later metamorphose into Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Strangelove, and any number of amoral explorers of the unknown—including, most recently, *Spider-Man 2*'s Dr. Octopus. It is almost too easy to caricature the scientist as the quintessential villain of modern times, and to depict science as the work of the devil, especially in a society still ruled in many ways by superstition.

Still, and because of this, **science must fight for its place in the popular consciousness, and certainly in policymaking.** Whether we are talking about birth control, Bt corn, the bridge program, SARS, or election surveys, scientists must make their voices heard by the public at large, and they should get all the help they can from the media. In UP, we are making a small but significant effort through a regular feature that has just started in the *Philippine Star*—a weekly column called “Star Science,” which is being contributed by a group of leading UP scientists, who were organized to write about science-related topics in an accessible, popular style.

And the work of bridging the humanities and the sciences must start among us. Forty-five years after C. P. Snow's famous and contentious lecture at Cambridge on “The Two Cultures,” we continue to suffer to some degree from this dichotomy of interests.

Except in academe and in laudably special conferences such as this one, very little formal contact exists between Filipino scientists and humanists (I am employing these terms liberally, and the social scientists can situate themselves wherever they feel more comfortable, if they will not accept Snow's definition of them as the “third culture”).

And even in academe, the only thing that often binds scientists and humanists together are issues of academic and national politics; rarely are the two mindsets brought to bear on the same subject or problem, and rarely do they seem to converge.

### **C.P. Snow revisited—the debate continues**

I do not mean the usual admonitions for the scientists to read Shakespeare and for the humanists to understand thermodynamics, as C. P. Snow seemed to suggest, but rather to argue for more debate and discussion within the university on matters of national significance, informed by viewpoints across the disciplines, so that we inform each other first, and inform each other as well.

Speaking of Snow, it might be interesting if not helpful to revisit some of his points [4, 5], and I will mention just a few:

1. “Literature changes more slowly than science. It hasn’t the same automatic corrective, and so its misguided periods are longer.” Snow says that scientific analysis is inherently more reliable because it invites and accepts immediate validation.
2. “[Scientists] are inclined to be impatient to see if something can be done: and inclined to think that it can be done, until it’s proved otherwise. That is their real optimism, and it’s an optimism that the rest of us badly need.” Snow suggests that unlike the avatars of what he calls “traditional culture,” scientists are inherently optimistic.
3. “There is a moral component right in the grain of science itself, and almost all scientists form their own judgments of the moral life.” Not only are scientists optimistic; they are also morally minded.
4. “It is bizarre how very little of twentieth-century science has been assimilated into twentieth-century art.” And when science gets used in art, Snow says that it is more often used wrongly, as with the term “refraction.”
5. “[Humanists] give a pitying chuckle at the news of scientists who have never read a major work of English literature. They dismiss them as ignorant specialists. Yet their own ignorance and their own specialisation is just as startling.” This is where Snow challenges people like writers or professors of literature to explain the second law of thermodynamics, which he argues is just as basic to human knowledge as anything Shakespeare ever wrote.”

These were, of course, profoundly provocative if not belligerent statements to make, and they served their purpose in generating a storm of academic debate that has not died down in five decades. One of the earliest and most scathing responses came from the literary critic F. R. Leavis, who—after dismissing Snow’s “incapacity as a novelist [as] total”—proceeds to attack Snow’s arguments with what wincing onlookers described as “reptilian venom” [5]. Leavis may have indeed been too apoplectic for his position’s own good, but cooler heads would later say the same thing: that Snow’s arguments, while seeming to be urgent and significant, were terribly muddled, and pandered to a debased notion of culture.

The Snow-Leavis controversy was, of course, just the latest incarnation in its time of an age-old debate that goes at least as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to Bacon and Descartes. At the core of the debate, as R. S. Crane [6] among others has noted, was the question of by what kind of knowledge we are best served—to oversimplify it somewhat, whether by love poems and fables or by the observation of natural phenomena. That debate would be followed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by another tiff between the so-called Ancients and Moderns.

### **We need all kinds of learning**

Today, we have more or less come to the sensible conclusion that we need all kinds of learning, albeit from different individuals, and embed a little of everything in every individual. Thus we have, in UP, the general education program that all our students take prior to specialization.

We teachers often complain that our students never learn enough of what we expect them to learn. In the humanities and the social sciences, we deplore the poor preparation and cultural illiteracy of students, who cannot write complete and cogent sentences, read maps, cite important dates and events, and appreciate music more than five years old. But I suspect that even more work needs to be done on side of science and mathematics.

If our critical faculties were truly at work, the Filipino humanist should have no trouble concluding that the way forward—culturally and economically—can only be led by a greater awareness and application of science in our national life, especially in our education.

We expend so much energy arguing about whether we should be using English or Filipino as our primary medium of instruction, but sadly this impassioned debate does not seem to have been matched by a comparably emotional investment in science and math. I emphasize the word “emotion,” because it is quite often the gateway to our reason and then our imagination, and unless complex issues and concerns are expressed in personal terms and personal stakes, it is difficult to engage the public in matters of national policy such as S&T development.

### **Like the arts, science must matter in the news, in the popular imagination, and in public policy**

In the humanities, we are helped at least by the higher public profile that has recently been given to our National Artists like the late Nick Joaquin (and never mind that most of them seem to be dead or dying). Artists are creatures of media, and we have a built-in support system that tends to focus attention on our own luminaries. While the public at large would still be hard put to name three National Artists, I doubt that even your typical UP sophomore can name one National Scientist, dead or alive.

Call them “poster boys and girls,” but we need this kind of media-savvy promotion of our highest achievers, both to create role models and also to raise the bar of intellectual achievement. Our people must know that there are other, worthier pursuits than to become a politician or a movie star—or both. Like the arts, science must matter in the news, in the popular imagination, and in public policy.

Unfortunately, we all have to deal with the supervening claims of politics, which are neither humanist nor scientific. Indeed, we do not suffer so much from the “two



cultures”, but rather from their subservience in this country to a third “culture” (with apologies to Snow and the social scientists)—the culture of politics, of base survival and self-interest from the lowest to highest levels of our government and society. Politics is keeping us from thinking straight—whether scientifically or humanistically. Our most recent attempts to get a scientific handle on how we think as a body politic—through an instrument that editorialists spoke of in almost derisive terms as “the survey”—met with more resounding skepticism than we normally reserve for voodoo and UFOs.

Thanks to the successful co-optation of the intelligentsia by the political powers that be, there is no real incentive to be learned; one only has to be smart to get ahead. Many of our leaders are either poorly read, or corrupt enough to ignore what they have read.

Our intellectual growth has also been retarded by a pedestrian conception of science and the humanities as afterthoughts—bordering on the frivolous—rather than national imperatives. The humanities, in particular, are often taken for little more than entertainment, something for one’s leisure and amusement, a labor and a profession only to their purveyors, rather than a handle on life’s affairs as practical and as sturdy as any other.

**So, where lies the hope, if any, for a more enlightened view and a stronger articulation of the concerns of Philippine humanities and science?**

As ever, the hope must lie in education, with us, among ourselves, and then from us to the people at large. It seems almost too facile and typically academic to suggest in a symposium that the answer lies in more symposia, but it does. We need to talk about how massive social problems like poverty, hunger, injustice, and illiteracy can be approached from our respective disciplines, and how our perceptions can be reintroduced into the classroom, the laboratory of our intellectual future.

We must go beyond the school. To go back to my earlier point, if the humanities are to help us govern ourselves wisely and well, they must reach out to all sectors, especially the poor. Better libraries, better movies and television, and better access to the Internet would be a good start.

We must learn to use the mass media, print and electronic alike. Scientists, especially, must weigh in with their opinions, and project themselves as thinking personalities with names and faces whom ordinary people can identify with. This comes perilously close to proposing that academics engage in popular politics, but at least some of us should; many of us are already engaged in or by NGOs. The right voice in the right committee in Congress could do more for our people than a number of funded research projects.

### **Science and the humanities are coming back together in digital culture**

Finally, the most fertile common ground for science and the humanities may yet be information technology—and not only in the way it spreads information quickly and widely, but precisely in the way it works. Science and the humanities are coming back together in unexpected ways in digital culture. In a paper that pays homage to what he calls “digital culture” and “the rise of the digital demotic,” Prof. Lou Burnard [7], a former English teacher who learned to write code and later became Assistant Director of Oxford University Computing Services, observes that “Digital systems foster, embody, and support a fragmented, nonlinear, decentered, view of text and textuality which seems strangely congruent with current thinking about such phenomena: which is cause and which effect I would not presume to judge, but current cultural perspectives are inherently digital... The computer offers those interested in the use of language itself incomparably better tools than we have had hitherto; in particular, they enable new kinds of evidence and new methods for their assessment and incorporation into language teaching; particularly in Europe, where multilinguality is a major political desideratum, this means that language processing technologies are central to the concerns of the state as well as those of the academy.... Digital techniques offer us a cheap and universal medium for the description, distribution, and analysis of all kinds of pre-existing cultural artefacts.”

Some of us are privileged today to be caught up in this nexus of new discoveries and opportunities enabled by spectacular advances in technology and by the more salutary aspects of globalization. Let’s hope we can bring more of our people into this brave new world—after we draw its map, and locate ourselves in it.

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