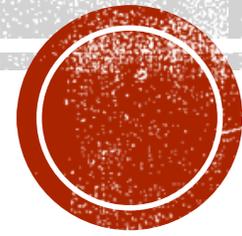


THE HUMANITIES

Are Our Students Asking ...

What Does it Mean to be Human Today?

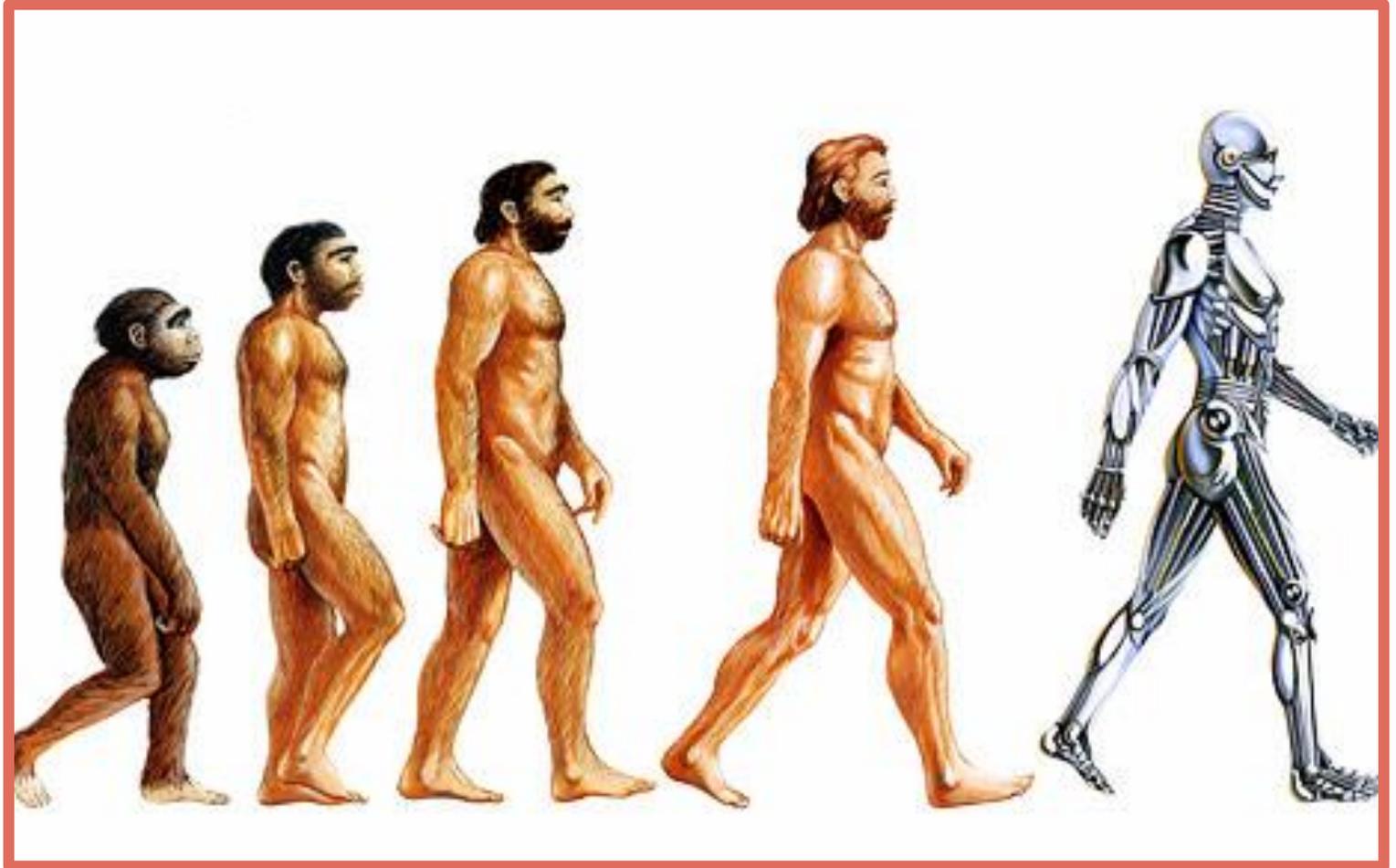


Andrew Rusnak
Greg Campbell
Mike Jacobs

The League, 2020, Seattle

Is this the ultimate question?

What is it about being human today—which may mean something different than what it did 50 years ago and will probably change even more 50 years from now—are we teaching our students and how does this relate to teaching the humanities?





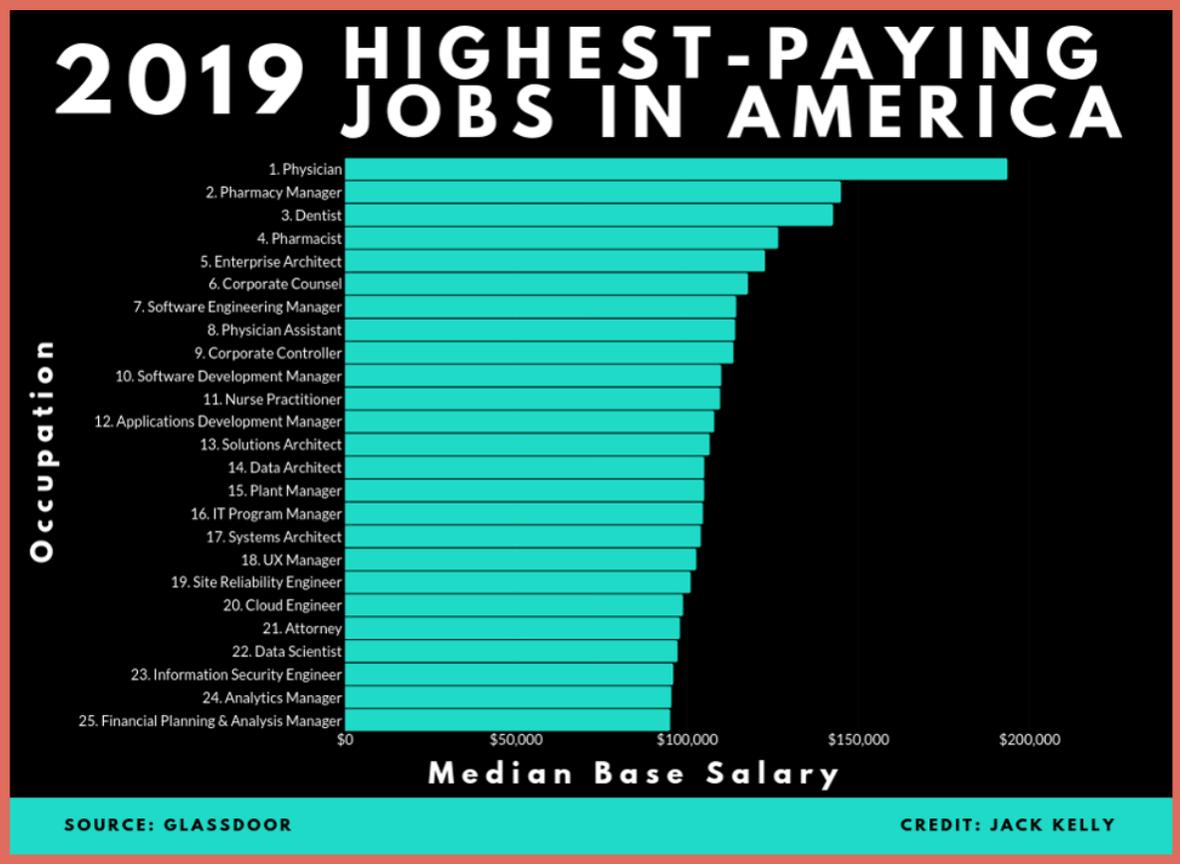
“Plato? My dad said to get off my ass and get a job!!”

Where we are?

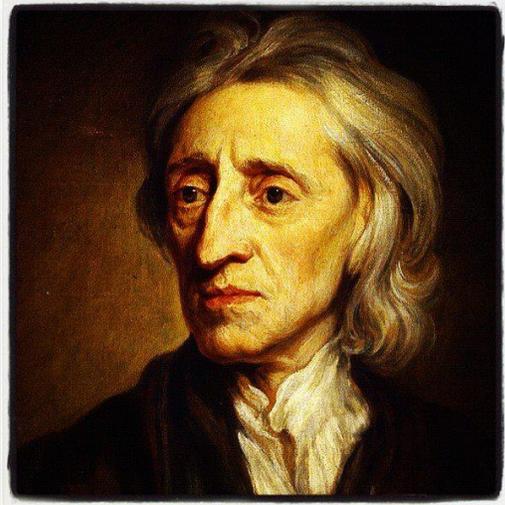
What are we teaching our students about what it means to be human?

The current crisis in the Humanities started with “The Great Recession” when students and their parents determined that the “value” of an education was contextualized in a strictly monetary dynamic, that college is an ROI proposition.

Some say this would change, that there would be more humanities majors, if college was free?

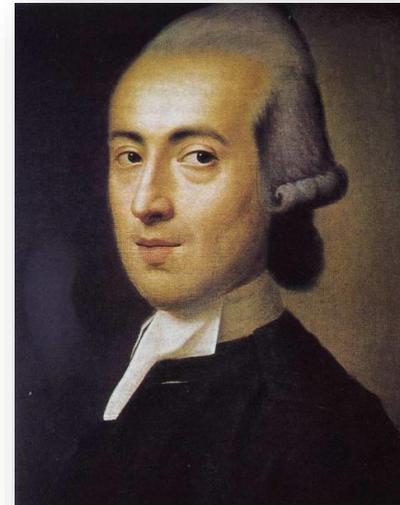


The dichotomy in thought begins ...



John Locke (17th Century), British Empiricist. Empiricists claim that sense experience (observation and explanation via experimentation) is the ultimate source of knowledge.

Who is the empirical thinker and who is the rational thinker?

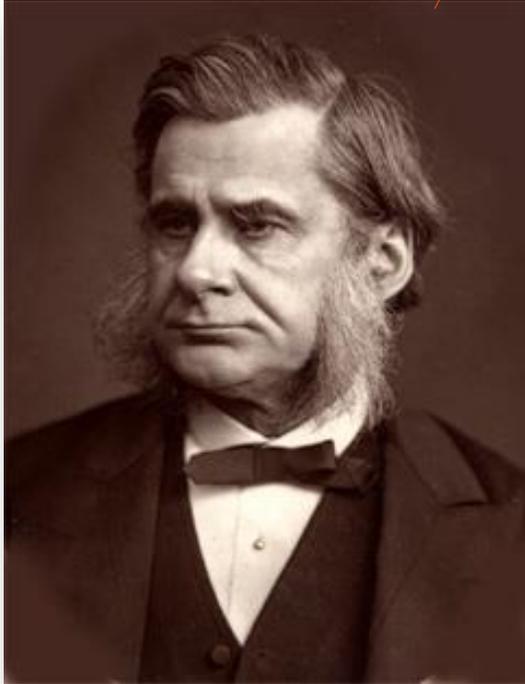


Immanuel Kant (17th Century), German Rationalist. Rationalists argue that there are cases where the content of our concepts or knowledge outstrips the information that sense experience can provide. Reason provides additional information about the world.

Crude History!
17th Cent.



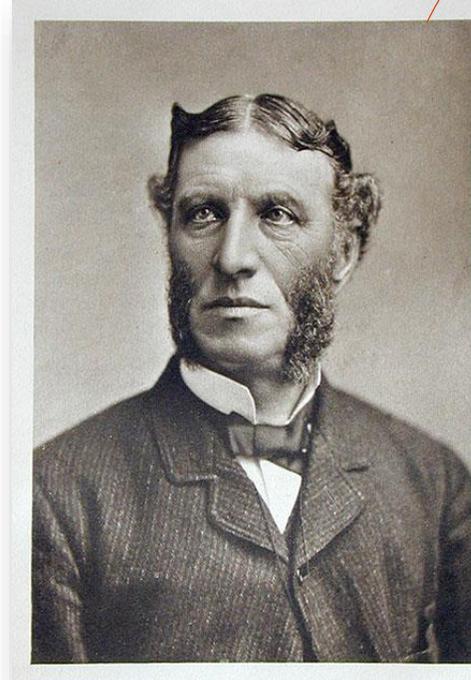
How we got here?



Thomas Huxley, 1825-1895, biologist, "Darwin's Bulldog," natural selection, wrote *Evidence on Man's Place in Nature*, and "founded a remarkable dynasty of English scientists and thinkers."

"Hey Arnold, Shakespeare sucks, all hail Darwin!"

Whose the science person and whose the literature person?



Mathew Arnold, 1822-1888, English poet, literary and social critic, meditative and rhetorical, author of *Literature and Science* (1882)."

"Yeah, I explain all that in Lit and Science, if you could only read!"

Crude History!
19th Cent.



- In *Literature and Science* Arnold seeks to rebuke Huxley's call for the predominance of education to "pass from letters to science," to transition from "mere literary instruction and education" to "sound, extensive and practical scientific knowledge."
- Advocates of the natural/physical sciences proposed to make it the "main part of education" and push literature, or, the classics, into the background.

Literature and Science by Matthew Arnold (1882)¹

Practical people talk with a smile of Plato and of his absolute ideas; and it is impossible to deny that Plato's ideas do often seem unpractical and impracticable, and especially when one views them in connection with the life of a great work-a-day world like the United States. The necessary staple of the life of such a world Plato regards with disdain; handicraft and trade and the working professions he regards with disdain; but what becomes of the life of an industrial modern community if you take handicraft and trade and the working professions out of it? The base mechanic arts and handicrafts, says Plato, bring about a natural weakness in the principle of excellence in a man, so that he cannot govern the ignoble growths in him, but nurses them, and cannot understand fostering any other. Those who exercise such arts and trades, as they have their bodies, he says, marred by their vulgar businesses, so they have their souls, too, bowed and broken by them. And if one of these uncomely people has a mind to seek self and philosophy, Plato compares him to a bald little tinker, who has scraped together money, and has got his release from service, and has had a bath, and bought a new coat, and is rigged out like a bridegroom about to marry the daughter of his master who has fallen into poor and helpless estate.

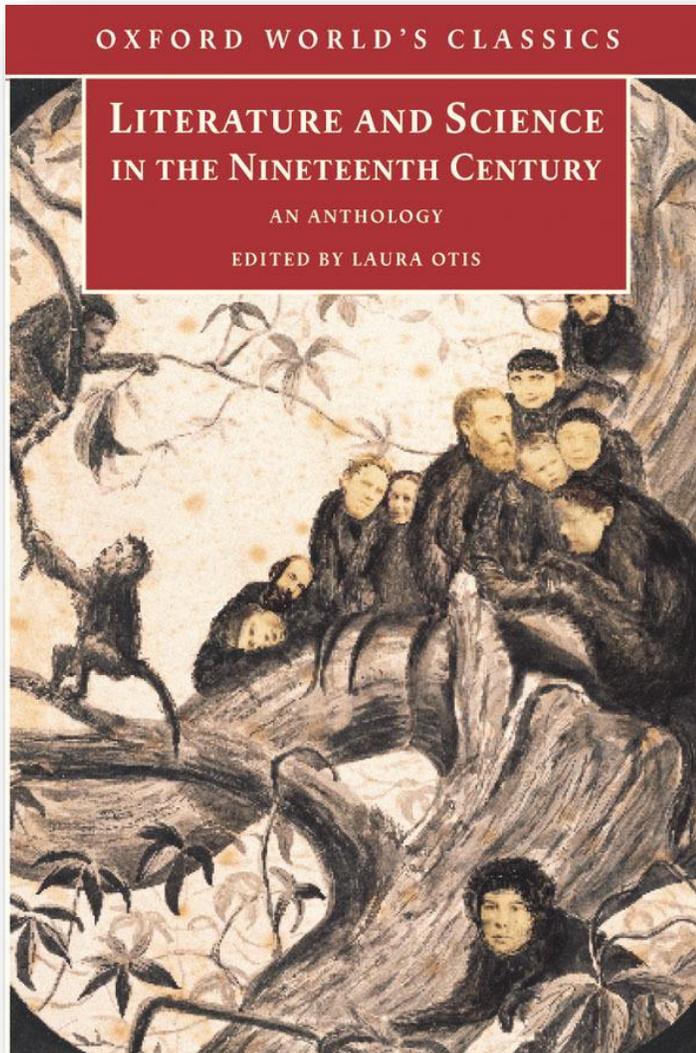
Nor do the working professions fare any better than trade at the hands of Plato. He draws for us an inimitable picture of the working lawyer, and of his life of bondage; he shows how this bondage from his youth up has stunted and warped him, and made him small and crooked of soul, encompassing him with difficulties which he is not man enough to rely on justice and truth as means to encounter, but has recourse, for help out of them, to falsehood and wrong. And so, says Plato, this poor creature is bent and broken, and grows up from boy to man without a particle of soundness in him, although exceedingly smart and clever in his own esteem. One cannot refuse to admire the artist who draws these pictures. But we say to ourselves that his ideas show the influence of a primitive and obsolete order of things, when the warrior caste and the priestly caste were alone in honour, and the humble work of the world was done by slaves. We have now changed all that; the modern majesty consists in work, as Emerson declares; and in work, we may add, principally of such plain and dusty kind as the work of cultivators of the ground,, handicraftsmen, men of trade and business, men of the working professions. Above all is this hue in a great industrious community such as that of the United States.

Now education, many people go on to say, is still mainly governed by the ideas of men like Plato, who lived when the warrior caste and the priestly or philosophical class were alone in honour, and the really useful part of the community were slaves. It is an education fitted for persons of leisure in such a community. This education passed from Greece and Rome to the feudal communities of Europe, where also the warrior caste and the priestly caste were alone held in honour, and where the really useful and working part of the community, though not nominally slaves as in the pagan world, were practically not much better off than slaves, and not more seriously regarded. And how absurd it is, people end by saying, to inflict this education upon an industrious modern community, where very few indeed are persons of leisure, and the mass to be considered has not leisure, but is bound, for its own great good, and for the great good of the world at large, to plain labour and to industrial pursuits, and the education in question tends necessarily to make men dissatisfied with these pursuits and unfitted for them!



But things weren't all horrible in the 19th Century:

It wasn't Always Like This?



“Although we are used to thinking of science and the humanities as separate disciplines, in the nineteenth century this division was not recognized. As the scientist John Tyndall pointed out, not only were science and literature both striving to better "man's estate," they shared a common language and cultural heritage. The quest for "origins", the nature of the relationship between society and the individual, and what it meant to be human were subjects that occupied both the writing of scientists and novelists.”

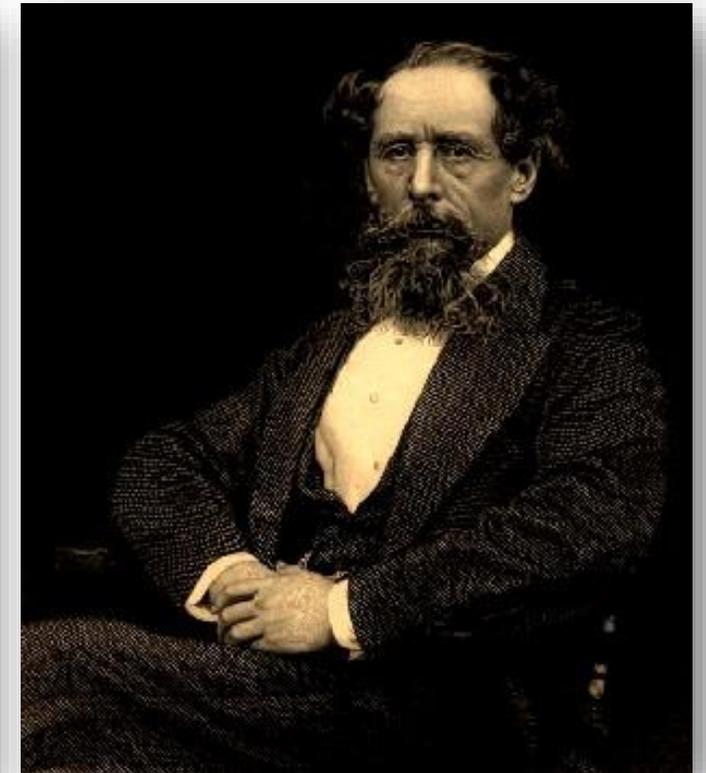
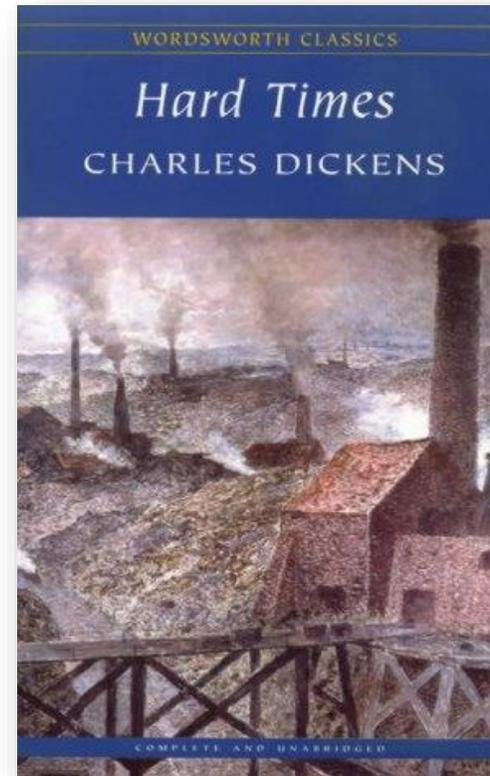
—Laura Otis, *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century*



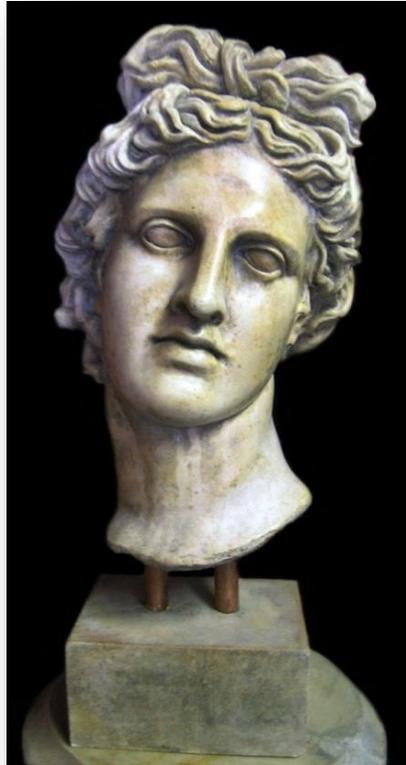
More 19th Century Evidence:

- Science, in Dickens view, does immense good—moral, social, and intellectual—but only when it works hand-in-hand with imagination and reverence.
- Dickens' objection in *Hard Times* was not to science, but to the reductionist principle that imposes stultifying order and leaves no room for emotion or imagination.
- “The facts of science are at least as full of poetry as the most poetical fancies,” Dickens wrote in an 1848 review of Robert Hunt's, *The Poetry of Science*.

It wasn't Always Like This?



Even in Classical times ...



**Apollo was
the god of
both poetry
AND
medicine**

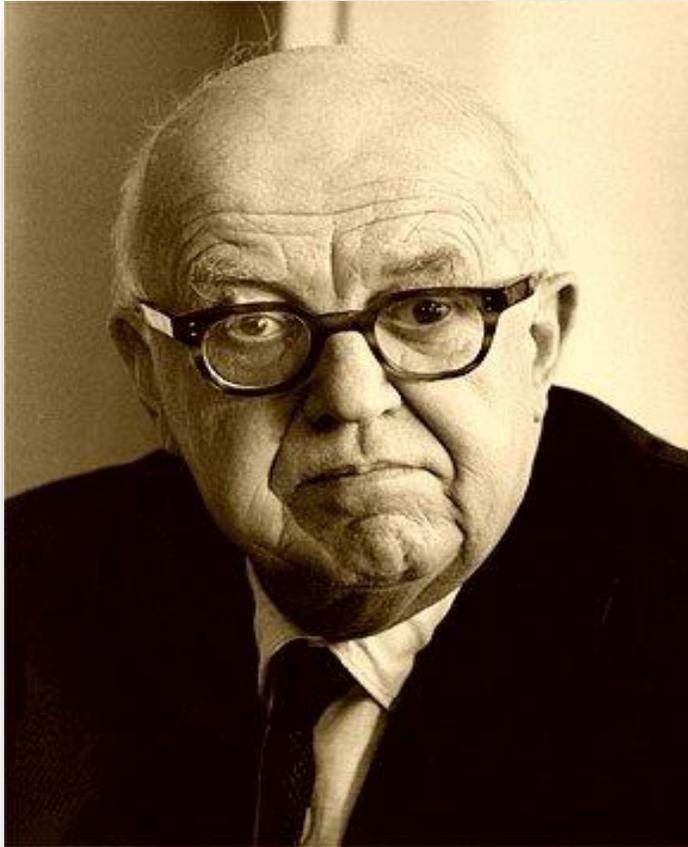


**Art and Technology share a
common ancestor, *techne*'
the Greek word for art, skill,
craft.**



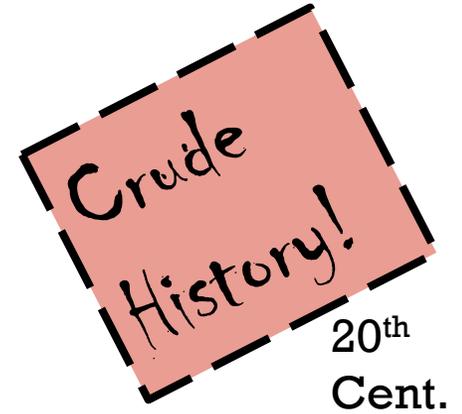
How we got here? The conflict survived the consilience.

The Two Cultures



Physicist and novelist C.P. Snow introduced *The Two Cultures*, at a Sir Robert Rede lecture at Cambridge in 1959. He defined the chasm between the literary and scientific communities. This oft-referenced lecture is often cited as the seminal point of the current debate.

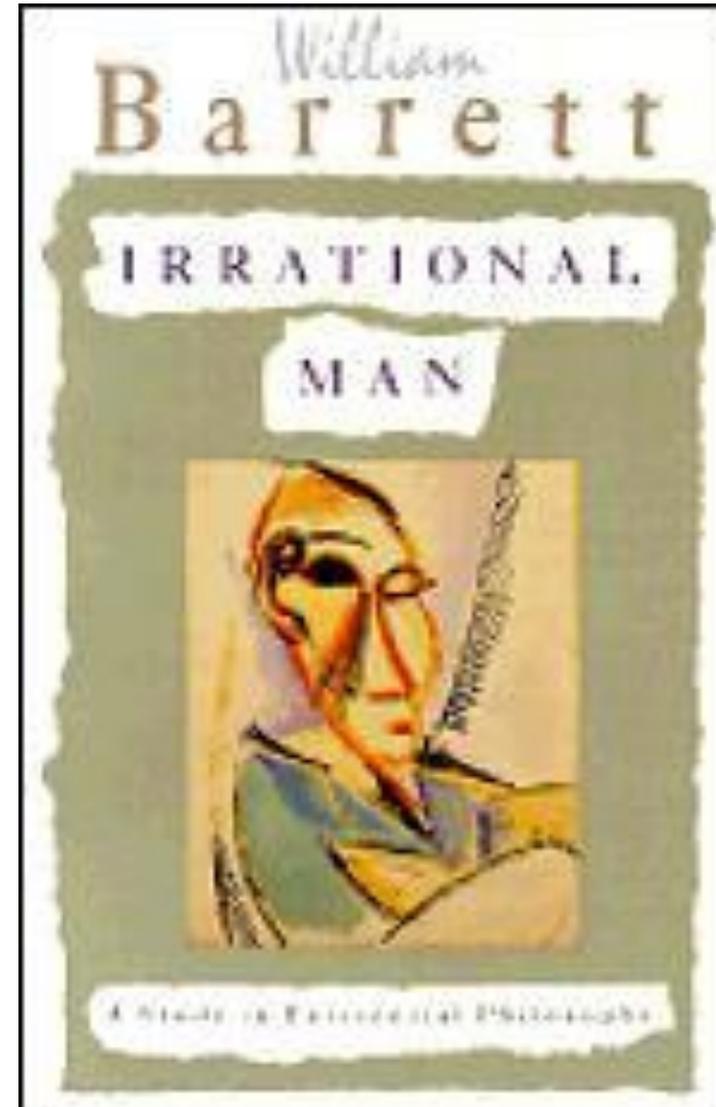
The cotemporary British literary intelligentsia was elitist and, therefore, structurally prohibitive when it came to advancing science and technology.



But the examples Snow alluded to morphed into over-specialization, which has its own issues.

“Specialization is the price we pay for the advancement of knowledge. A price, because the path of specialization leads away from the ordinary and concrete acts of understanding the terms of which man actually lives his day-to-day life.”

—William Barrett, *Irrational Man*





“This is a horrible slide Dude!”

20th Century Brouhaha

The inescapable context of the “either/or” dichotomy-driven media culture of over specialization?



Conventional/Popular View of Science = deductive reasoning, reductionism, abstractions, positivism/empirical evidence, overwhelming objectivity, abstractionism, either/or, black and white, finite, cause and effect, concrete, left brain, “all the answers,” consciousness is a byproduct of neural activity, a human being is no more than a highly sophisticated computer, the mind can be reverse engineered, science is not relativistic, the immediate end to the “animating principle,” Locke’s empiricism.

Materialist/Physicalist Monist: Nothing exists outside the tangible, material world, Consciousness is a simple by-product of the brain/central nervous system. Consciousness cannot “cause” anything.

↓
Science Curricula?

Vs.

Creative “Humanistic” view of science = inductive reasoning, subjectivity, exploration, innovation, imagination, creativity, gray matter, infinite, entrepreneurial, art, “mystery embraced,” right brain, “answers are always and forever suspect and susceptible to reinterpretation,” consciousness is a synthesis of brain, body, and environment that is always in flux, science is not value free, Feyerabend’s *Against Method*, Kuhn’s *The [Real] Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Karl Popper’s “critical rationalism” and rejection of classical empiricism.

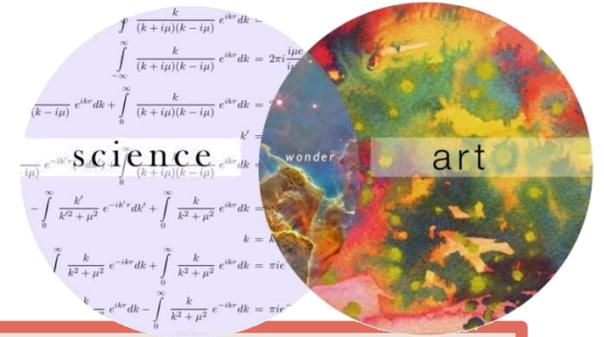
Dualism: Either the mind and body work, in some way, independently, or there is a two way interaction between the two. (Can’t have one without the other.)

Relativism: Claims that truth, goodness, or beauty is relative to a reference frame and no absolute, over-arching standards to adjudicate between reference frames exists.

↓
Humanities Curricula?



11 Assumptions & Observations About the 21st Century?



1. Science and Technology (S&T) dominates culture;
2. How humans relate to each other, what they value, is changing. The “memes” (the ideas, representations, behaviors) that define culture and are passed around and down from one generation to the next, are changing and in some ways deemphasize conventional interpretations of the humanities;

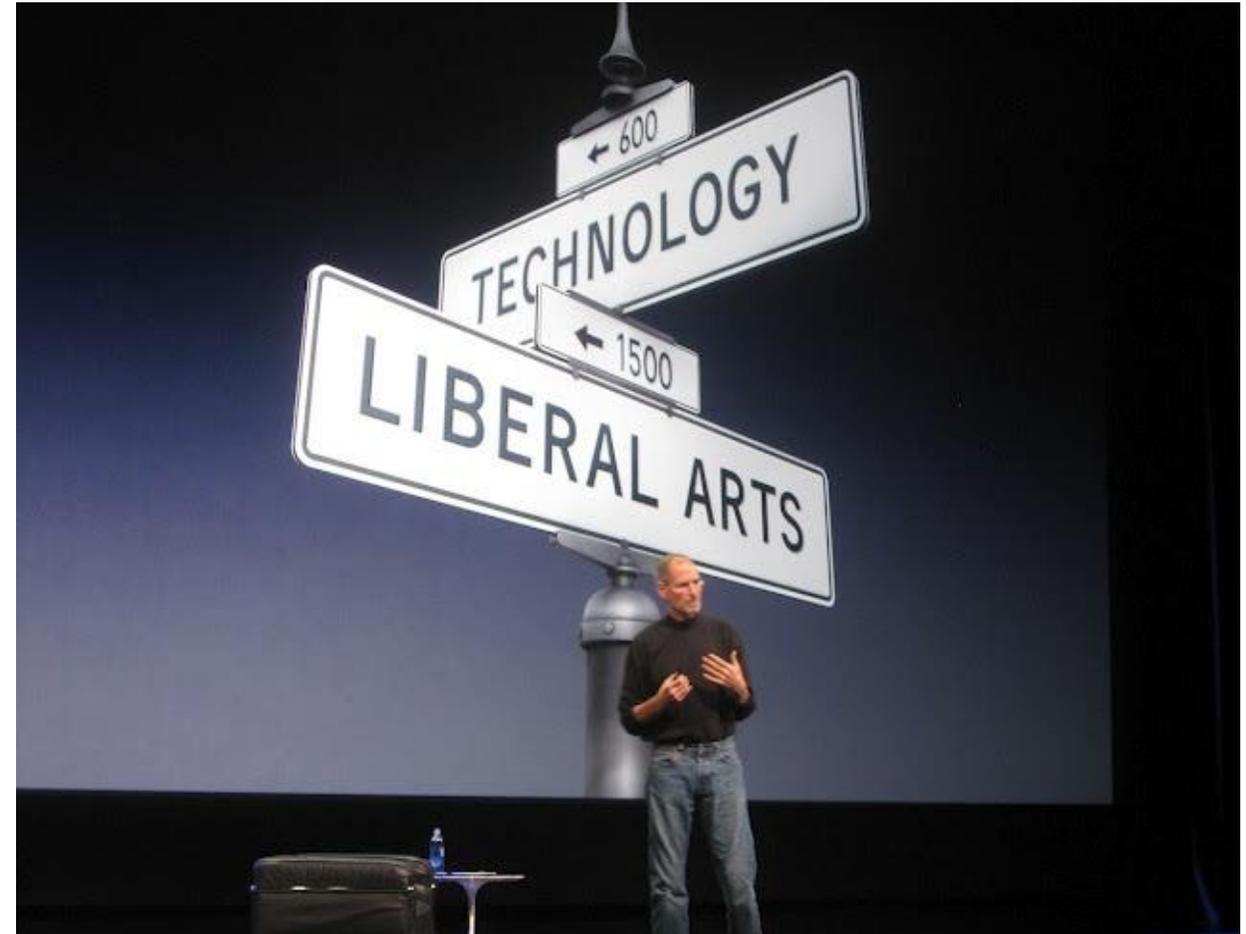


Assumptions & Observations

3. We are rewiring our brains via digital communication technology. The rhythm of today's culture is like playing pinball, it bounces, ricochets, multitasks, lands and takes off with incredible speed whereas the study of humanities is slow, reflective, pensive, contemplative, focused. Have we made this kind of thinking and where it comes from the enemy? Why don't students like to read?
4. Evolution, up to this point, has been a dynamic controlled through adaptation to external forces (nature and culture). We are now entering an age where humans will control their evolutionary destiny from within, internally, via bio-technology, genetic engineering, nano-tech, AI;



5. Some researchers believe that consciousness (self awareness) has run its evolutionary course and will become extinct. Neuroscience believes consciousness is an illusion (free will, agency, intentionality, for instance). Are our students going through the rigors of self discovery experienced by previous generations?;
6. The old, but rather historically recent, vacillations between S&T and humanities, the “I’ve seen this many times before” scenario where the humanities are devalued is no longer. This time it’s for real, are we witnessing an “extinction event”?



Assumptions & Observations

7. In order for “civilization as we know it” to survive, how we’ve come to define the humanities, down to the myriad ways we relate to each other through the exchange of art and ideas, either has to be valued as it is now, what it has become, preserved and perpetuated, or it will (maybe it should?) be redefined how? In a modern context?
8. What role do the Humanities play in solving the world’s problems, many of which have been created by “advances” in S&T (climate change, over population, income inequality, exposure to ambient carcinogenic pollutants)?



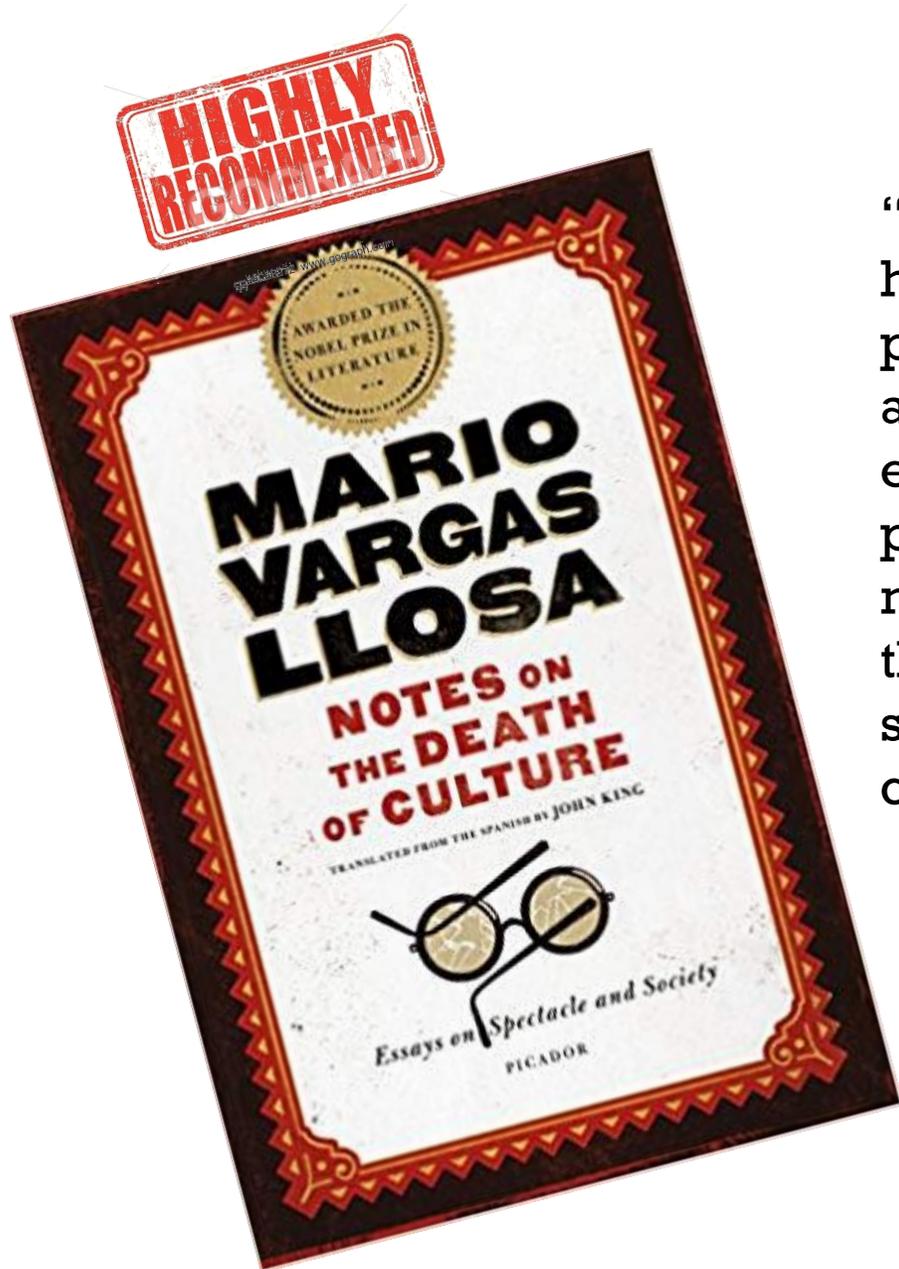
9. Previous to the 20th Century, science and technology were products of the metaphysical culture, a humanistic, interdisciplinary tradition that—within political, economic, and social contexts—inspired critical and imaginative thought, argumentation, exploration into the pervasive question, **What does it mean to be human today compared to yesteryear? Today, is science and technology still part of this culture?**



Assumptions & Observations

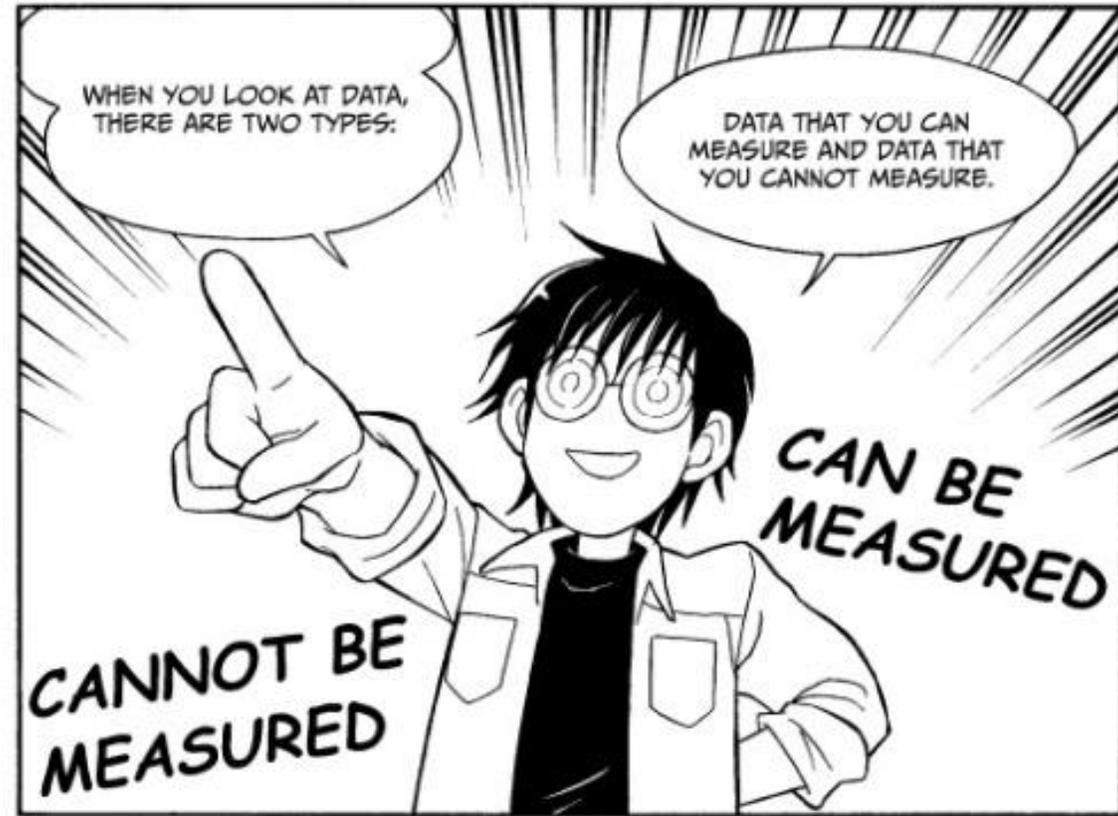
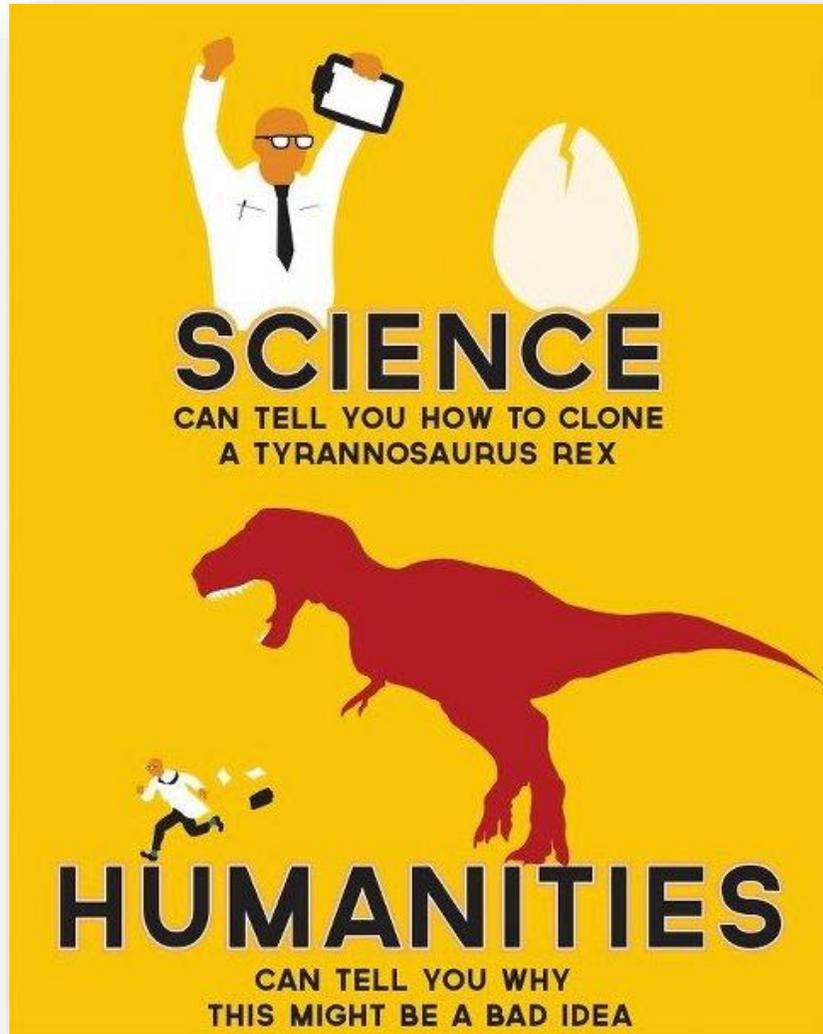
10. The media has created an either/or culture, where the middle ground, the gray area, “subjectivity,” has been devalued and deemphasized. This makes it difficult to reach consensus on anything. The “illusion” most reinforced and subscribed to is that S&T uses reductionist strategies on a linear path toward the only useful explanations of anything;
11. To a significant extent, the humanities are about learning how to ask the right questions. What are the right questions to ask when it comes to a culture dominated by S&T? Our students are conditioned to take tests, there has to be a right or wrong answer to everything?





“ Post-Culture has destroyed the myth that the humanities humanize. What so many optimistic educationalists and philosophers believed, that a liberal education accessible to all would guarantee a future of progress, peace, liberty, and equality of opportunity in modern democracies had not proved to be the case: From George Steiner: ‘...the libraries, museums, theaters, universities, research centres, in and through which the transmission of the humanities and of the sciences mainly takes place, can prosper next to the concentration camps.’”





From "Manga Guide to Statistics", Shin Takahashi, 2008



Now that we are here, what do we do?

