

IS THERE A KIND OF KNOWLEDGE AVAILABLE ONLY THROUGH HUMANISTIC STUDIES?¹

I SHALL FOCUS on one problem: "Is there a kind of knowledge available only through the humanities?" The answer is: yes. But I shall not stop there, because in the humanities one-word answers are only a beginning and almost everything depends on how they are worked out.

What are "the humanities"? The study of art and music, literature and history, religion and philosophy. In all of these fields a simple assertion or proposition counts for little. What is wanted is knowledge of another kind. Something bigger? Something comprehensive and vast? Vastness is out of fashion.

In the last part of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* there is a chapter entitled "The Leech." Zarathustra asks a conscientious scholar whether he is an expert on the leech and receives the reply: "That would be an immensity; how could I presume so much! That of which I am the master and expert is the *brain* of the leech: that is *my* world." Since that was written in 1885, more and more scholars have developed microscopic specialties while resenting questions about goals and ultimate purposes as Philistine. But those who care about the humanities should reflect on the question whether there is a kind of knowledge available only through humanistic studies.

What kind of knowledge is available only through humanistic studies? In two words, "historical knowledge." That may suggest antiquarianism and irrelevancy. Our civilization has become so future-oriented that many teachers and scholars hesitate to say openly that they are interested in the past. Wherever we look we note the cult of youth and lack of respect for the old. Before

World War II well-brought-up boys as well as grown men got up to offer their seats to older people whenever there were not enough seats to go around. This was no mere matter of etiquette. The same biblical book that commanded, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself," and specifically extended this commandment to include the stranger, also said, "You shall rise up before the hoary head." Indeed, all three commandments are found in the same chapter: Leviticus 19. Nor was it only in ancient Israel that respect for old people was joined to a reverence for the past and a profound interest in history; we find the same syndrome in ancient China. And the Jews and Chinese have survived while most other ancient peoples have not. Human attitudes toward the past, toward what is old, toward history are anything but trivial. And there is no reason to be ashamed of being interested in historical knowledge.

Moreover, historical knowledge need not be antiquarian. It includes the knowledge of what men and women of the past have felt, thought, and done. But, you may counter, who cares? I do, not least because most of the greatest artists, novelists, and poets, statesmen and philosophers, composers and religious teachers happen to be dead. And when I go into a good library, I can do what Saul and Odysseus tried to do: I can hear the voices of the dead. But Saul needed the witch of Endor to summon a single dead spirit who thundered at Saul: "Why have you disturbed me?" And the spirit of Samuel, whom Saul had known well when he was alive, spoke only a few sentences to him. Odysseus needed awesome courage to descend into the underworld—once. But we can put questions at will to many of the most remarkable men and women who ever lived, and often they willingly answer us and tell us a great deal we never even suspected.

The wholly untutored ear, to be sure, can make little sense of the words of the dead. What is required is not so much awesome courage as—humanistic studies. If we do not understand the languages in which the dead expressed themselves, we must depend on translators who are often unreliable; and if we consult several translators, we often find that they do not agree. It is invaluable to know the original languages thoroughly. But since none of us can know them all, we must learn to evaluate different translations.

Nor are languages all we need. The answers we hear were not really framed in answer to our questions. It is up to us to find out to what the dead were responding; to discover the context, the background, the dialogue of which initially we perceive only fragments. To understand Leibniz, it helps to know Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke, as well as Newton. To understand Paul's letters, we must know the Book of Acts, the Gospels, and the Old Testament, and we also require some knowledge of the Judaism of Paul's time, the Hellenistic Near East, the Roman world, and much else. Those who know the age in which a great writer or statesman lived, his predecessors, and some of his rivals perceive far more than those ignorant of the context.

In sum, humanistic studies can tell us what some of the most fascinating human beings of all time felt, thought, and did. Now philosophers sometimes distinguish *knowledge that* something is the case from *knowledge of* something or somebody. There is also, thirdly, *knowledge how* to do something. Clearly, humanistic studies give us *knowledge that* various things happened and that certain individuals did this and created that. Humanistic studies also yield *knowledge of* persons now dead. Both kinds of knowledge are available only through humanistic studies. Do humanistic studies also offer us *knowledge how* to do things?

We are apt to think that they do not because we often think of "know-how" as nothing more than a skill or aptitude which is acquired by *doing* something and not by the kind of study that we associate with the humanities. In some areas this is true enough. The knowledge how to ride a bicycle or how to swim is not obtained through humanistic studies. But the knowledge how to compose a quartet or a symphony is acquired by studying the music written by one's predecessors. The same is true of poetry, the novel, philosophy, painting, and sculpture.

If someone should object that it is possible to paint without knowing anything at all of the art of the past, it may be granted that one could make do with a living teacher; but it remains worth noting that all of the great painters of the past worked in a tradition—and if one wants to acquire the knowledge how to paint in the sense in which they painted, or how to write music or poetry, novels, or philosophy in the sense in which past masters

engaged in such pursuits, one finds that this knowledge is available only through humanistic studies. Of course, it does not follow that a person who wants to write philosophy in the sense in which the great philosophers of the past wrote philosophy must follow a broad program of humanistic studies, including music, for example. As far as the argument has taken us, it might be sufficient to read only philosophy. The phrase "in the sense in which past masters engaged in such pursuits" requires further explanation. People who have never studied philosophy sometimes introduce their opinions as their "philosophy." This kind of undisciplined self-expression needs to be distinguished from philosophy in the sense in which Aristotle and Kant pursued it. Similarly, the undisciplined self-expression of people who indulge themselves by painting without ever having studied the works of past masters needs to be distinguished from painting in the sense in which Michelangelo or Goya painted.

Some people think of creative artists and poets, composers and novelists, and possibly also philosophers as untutored men or women of genius who did not study the history of their subject and who would not have profited from it if they had done so. But that is a myth. One might call it the myth of the artist or, to cite the title of a relevant book by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*. Most major artists were people of great intelligence who knew the works of many of their predecessors very well indeed, and their own works are unthinkable apart from this knowledge. Of course, knowledge of this kind need not be acquired at a college or a university, and it is worth asking whether the virtual monopoly that colleges and universities have gained as centers of learning is not pernicious. Certainly, courses in "creative writing" are very dubious; no great poet, playwright, or novelist has ever emerged from such a course. But then such courses hold out the promise of shortcuts: Make do with a living teacher and dispense with the past!

We have seen, then, how humanistic studies yield three kinds of knowledge: knowledge that various things happened, knowledge of the dead, and knowledge how to do various kinds of creative work. The last point may come as something of a surprise. But Ben Shahn, a painter and graphic artist who was hardly a traditionalist, sometimes said that the best thing about certain art

schools was that they were housed in great museums and thus forced the students to walk past a large number of excellent paintings on their way to and from class. In the same way, a would-be novelist, philosopher, or poet learns his craft in large measure by reading novels, philosophy, and poetry of the past. If he were to read only contemporary materials, he would have no way of telling passing fashions and fads from works with staying power. Indeed, we have just discovered something else that is available only through humanistic studies: *taste*. Taste is not, strictly speaking, knowledge; yet it is not so thoroughly divorced from knowledge as many people think.

Taste is the power to discriminate, but even people who know a good deal of literature and think they know what recent works have lasting value and are the very best produced in the past ten or twenty years usually do not really know what they think they know. The committee that awards the annual Nobel Prize for literature furnishes the most tangible example. When anyone finds fault with their decisions during the past quarter century, he pits his own taste against the committee's, and there is nothing wrong with that; but other people may wonder whether the committee did not know best after all. But it would be hard, if not impossible, to find anyone with much knowledge of literature who would not agree that the record of the committee during its first ten years, from 1901 to 1910, was dismal.

On reflection, this only shows how difficult it is to judge one's contemporaries, and how it requires time to reach or approximate knowledge in such matters. When we consider the dead—and most of the greatest writers are dead—we can say without a reasonable doubt that we *know* that Tolstoy and Ibsen, Rilke and Freud wrote more important and enduring works than the ephemeral writers who won the Prize while they were passed over, year after year. People innocent of humanistic studies may suppose that judgments of taste are bound to be purely subjective and that any claim that Freud's works are superior to those of Eucken, a German philosopher who won the Prize but was nevertheless forgotten quickly, expresses no more than a bias. The chairman of the Prize committee said in 1910 that "Germany has not had a greater literary genius since Goethe" than Paul Heyse.²

But I *know* that this is nonsense and that Heine, Nietzsche, and Rilke were of an altogether different order, and so was Kafka a little later. How do I know? Through humanistic studies, and this kind of knowledge is available only through humanistic studies.

This may sound peremptory. The point is of sufficient importance to merit closer consideration. What can we discover more specifically as we study and compare the works of some great writers of the past? For one thing, what past critics have said about them. These critics did not only express opinions, they also made discoveries about the works they discussed. It is arguable whether the only way for us to acquire the knowledge they had is by reading their writings. Aren't some people today as good as they were and hence capable of making all the same discoveries without such help? To be sure, but even as we may see what nobody before us ever noted, at least some critics and scholars of the past are very likely to have noted things that we might well have overlooked. Moreover, many of our predecessors have made mistakes that we might well have made, too, but that are easier to recognize as errors when we find them in the works of others.

The study of secondary sources, of course, is only part of the story. The main point of humanistic studies is the exploration of the great works that have given rise to critical and scholarly discussions. And when my judgment that Heine, Nietzsche, and Rilke were far superior to Heyse is questioned, I do not say: I simply like them better than Heyse; it is a matter of taste like preferring frozen pudding ice cream to a chocolate sundae. Far from it. I try to *show* what I admire in the writers whom I consider superior. I call attention to what you are likely to have overlooked. And one might also call attention to what is bad or inferior in lesser works. In literature and art no less than in philosophy, judgments of quality need not be idiosyncratic and purely subjective. They can rest on intensive study and the ability to compare a work with hundreds of others that a neophyte simply is not aware of.

Occasionally, a good scholar or critic may contest the judgment of the majority and champion a work or a whole body of work that has not been appreciated sufficiently. Doing this can be one of the exciting rewards of humanistic studies. More often, one can point to the fact that an artist (say, Rembrandt) or a work (say, *Hamlet*)

has been acclaimed by generations of informed and sensitive critics, and that this creates some presumption of richness. I have no wish to imply that such matters can be settled by a majority vote or that large numbers of admirers are unlikely to be wrong. The point depends on the two adjectives: *informed* and *sensitive*. Even so, my judgment may differ from that of even the best writers on the subject, but in such cases it is incumbent upon me to justify my view by showing how and why they are mistaken. It would be an understatement to say that all this requires humanistic studies. This *is* humanistic studies.

One of the most important functions of the humanities is to teach perspective. Those who lack perspective assume that what is closest to them in time is also greatest; yet as it recedes in time it is dwarfed by what is more recent. In brief, they lack *taste*.

Taste, some people think, is purely subjective, and one person's taste is as good as another's. You like this, they say, and I like that; Jasper Johns is to their minds as good as Rembrandt, and Franz von Stuck as good as Vincent van Gogh. These last two comparisons, of course, are extreme, and anyone going that far might well be conceded to lack taste—except by people who have an axe to grind and realize that once they admit that such judgments would be outrageous their case is lost. Still, confronted with their own contemporaries, many people are led to think that what is close by is great; and the less they know about the field, the more helpless are they when comparing two or more contemporaries.

Hitler loved and admired Franz von Stuck, while he abominated van Gogh and his influence. This tells us a great deal about Hitler's lack of taste, his values, and his view of man, even if we keep in mind that Hitler was born in 1889 and that Franz von Stuck lived from 1863 to 1928, van Gogh from 1853 to 1890. In Hitler's time many Germans shared his lack of taste. Now that von Stuck and van Gogh are more nearly equidistant from us, few people, if any, would still make that particular judgment, even if some should prefer a painter *now* living to Vincent van Gogh.

Shaw and some of his contemporaries may have really thought that he was greater than Shakespeare; nobody now seems to think so, though Shaw was very good indeed compared to most playwrights since Ibsen. Nietzsche's contemporaries did not think of him as the greatest living German philosopher; but more than a

hundred years after the publication of his first book most people would reply, if asked whether he was the greatest: Who else was there? Almost all of the others, however large they loomed at the time, have long dropped out of sight.

Time is not only an artist but also a merciless critic who points up faults that at first went unnoticed. Some works become more beautiful and continued study enhances them, others become ridiculous or boring. Strictly speaking, of course, time does not pass any judgments; she does not even show anything. But she makes it much easier to see what most people failed to notice at close range.

We are gradually discovering how humanistic studies yield historical knowledge; knowledge that, of, and how; and knowledge of quality. Can we go still further and claim that humanistic studies offer us *knowledge of man* and that there is no other way to answer the ancient question of both the Psalmist and Job: What is man? Clearly, there is some knowledge about man that can be acquired through biology and medicine, but such knowledge is very partial and more of the body than of the mind. What of the so-called social sciences? They are not always easy to demarcate clearly from the humanities; but again it can be said that insofar as they are not humanistic, they leave out a large and significant body of knowledge that is available only through humanistic studies.

“What man is, is his deed, is the series of his deeds,” said Hegel in his introductory lectures on the philosophy of history. Many people associate this view with existentialism, for Jean-Paul Sartre, initially very much influenced by Husserl and phenomenology, revived Hegel’s point in his famous lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism.” But Hegel understood far better than Sartre, not to speak of other existentialists, that man’s deeds comprise history, and by no means only political history which is usually taught as a tale of wars and empires, conquests and dynasties. Some of the most distinctive manifestations of humanity are to be found in music, art, and literature, in philosophy and religion, and any study of man that neglects these realms comes nowhere near telling us what man is.

Even now the picture is not complete. The Greeks sought a kind of knowledge that no people before them had cultivated and that few have ever attained to any high degree: *self-knowledge*. How can one obtain that? Introspection does not get us very far on this road. Freud found a new way: to reconstruct one's own history, one's own development, using one's dreams and memories, behavior and misdeeds, one's thoughts and feelings, as a historian uses documents, taking nothing at face value but learning to interpret these materials. Freud founded a new branch of humanistic studies: humanistic psychology. That label, of course, has been used by a faction of post-Freudians, and if it makes for confusion we can dispense with it. The point is that Freud made psychology suitable for the attainment of self-knowledge by bringing to it methods developed in the humanities.

Even so, psychoanalysis is very far from holding the only key to self-knowledge. Through the study of art and music, literature and history, philosophy and religion we discover our own humanity, our own potentialities. As we read *Hamlet* or *Crime and Punishment*, or expose ourselves to van Gogh, Rembrandt, and Michelangelo, our conception of ourselves is changed. Encounters with Socrates or the Buddha, Mozart or Napoleon also change our self-understanding.

Some philosophers have puzzled themselves over the problem of our knowledge of other minds, without noting either how much literature contributes to that or how the knowledge of other minds may well precede our knowledge of ourselves. Consciousness precedes self-consciousness, and we become aware of the deeds or behavior of others before we become aware of our own. A mother's anger is experienced before one has ever been angry, a mother's love before one has ever loved. Literature and the other humanities increase our self-awareness and lead us to distinguish between feelings and thoughts that we had never sorted out before.

As they are usually taught, of course, the humanities do not contribute nearly so much to all these kinds of knowledge as they might. In *The Future of the Humanities* I have dealt both with the ways in which they are taught all too often and with what *might* be done and how to do it.³ Here, however, my chief concern is with kinds of knowledge available only through the humanities, and

what we have found out so far shows how real the loss is when teachers of the humanities do not help their students to obtain these kinds of knowledge. For the social and natural sciences do not teach these kinds of knowledge, and if *we* do not teach them nobody else will.

In the book just mentioned I offered four major reasons for teaching the humanities. Not one of them was to communicate knowledge. Yet one would expect after what has been said so far in this paper that the *raison d'être* of the humanities must be to transmit historical knowledge; knowledge that, of, and how; knowledge of quality; knowledge of man; and self-knowledge. If a teacher of one or another of the humanities can and should do all this, how could there be still more important reasons for teaching the humanities? Or is it not a matter of greater importance but rather a different way of looking at the humanities? To determine that, we must briefly consider the four reasons discussed in the book.

The first is the conservation and cultivation of the greatest works of humanity. This does not conflict with anything said here but places the emphasis less on what the humanities can do for us than on what we can do for them. Instead of asking how we can use them for our gain, the accent is on reverence. But having discovered how the great poets and painters teach us something about what man is and how they increase our self-knowledge, I feel more than ever that it would be a crime to leave their works to oblivion and destruction and that it is of the first importance to expose the young to them. Not everything needs to be spelled out in detail by a teacher, and we need not be too anxious to force the last drop of knowledge down the throats of our students. The crucially important thing is to confront them with the great works and to let them discover what is there. What is best is always to enable the students to make discoveries for themselves.

This may sound abstract, but the fact is that at the beginning of an upperclass course in the philosophy of religion at one of the world's leading universities, only one out of more than twenty students in the fall of 1976 could name five Hebrew prophets, and the students' other answers to questions about the Bible, not to speak of post-Biblical Judaism and Christianity or Oriental

religions, were of a kind. Some claimed to know the Bible well, but they did not. Even in our best colleges, students are made to read reams of ephemeral drivel, but most of them graduate without ever having read most of the greatest books ever written, and knowing almost nothing of the world's art.

It is not as if professors had so much vital knowledge that their first concern must be to communicate it to their charges. It would make more sense to say that, having realized how much knowledge can be gained through study of the Bible and Greek tragedy, of Plato and Goya, Beethoven and Caesar, we must make sure that our students are exposed to the greatest works of humanity, and we must do what we can to enable them to gain some of this knowledge. Some of the most rewarding hours with Goya or Sophocles will not be spent in the classroom but in a theater or in the Prado, but a teacher can try his best to make the hours more rewarding—and to lead students to go to the theater and the Prado.

The second major reason for teaching the humanities is that religion and philosophy, literature and art are concerned to some extent with the ends of life, with human goals and ultimate aims. A thoughtful person should reflect on such questions and not simply drift along, but the natural and social sciences do not encompass such problems—and many professors in the humanities lean over backwards to be scientific and not to deal with normative questions. Yet such questions are central in the sacred books of the East and West, in Plato and Aristotle, Spinoza and Kant, in Greek tragedy and the Russian novel. My discussion of important knowledge that can be acquired only through humanistic studies is not meant to suggest that humanists should ape their colleagues in the natural and social sciences by seeking only knowledge and neglecting the discussion of alternative goals. If anything, the discussion of purposes is more important; but in practice there need not be any conflict between that and the search for the kind of knowledge discussed earlier.

The third major reason for teaching the humanities is to teach vision, but this bald statement may not make much sense apart from the detailed development of this suggestion in *The Future of the Humanities*. Suffice it to say that the point depends on a contrast between vision and blindness and some discussion of myopia

and microscopism as well as lack of perspective. Obviously, this fits in well with the discussion of the various kinds of knowledge mentioned earlier.

The last major reason for teaching the humanities is to foster a critical spirit—which again does not conflict with the attempt to acquire the kinds of knowledge discussed here. But which takes precedence? In the course of humanistic studies one might—and really should—encounter a magnificent and vastly influential passage near the beginning of one of Lessing's inspired polemics (*Duplik*, 1778, end of section I):

Not the truth in whose possession some human being is or thinks he is, but the honest trouble he has taken to get at the truth makes up the worth of a human being. For it is not through the possession but through the search for truth that his powers are expanded, and this alone constitutes his ever growing perfection. Possession makes tranquil, indolent, proud—

If God held all the truth in his right hand, and in his left hand the sole ever live striving for truth, albeit with the proviso that I must always and eternally be in error, and he said to me, Choose! I should humbly seize his left hand, saying: Father, give! Pure truth is after all for you alone!

Do these lines offer us a kind of knowledge available only through humanistic studies? Yes, they do. Reading these lines and a good many more, we learn *that* Lessing wrote this, *when* he wrote it, and what interesting controversy prompted him to say this. We can also ask how these lines struck Goethe (*Faust!*) or the German romantics, what Kierkegaard said about them, and much more. These lines also contribute significantly to our *knowledge of* Lessing, who was one of the most remarkable and admirable men of letters of all time. One can also learn *how* to be a critic and polemicist by reading Lessing's criticism and polemics and the kindred efforts of the few polemicists and critics who can stand comparison with him. One can also learn from Lessing about taste and quality in art and literature; and it is interesting to ask what makes his writings, including his plays, as good as they are.

What of knowledge of man and of ourselves? The lines I have quoted present a distinctive view of man that is sharply at odds with the views of many philosophers who have claimed to offer us

absolute, certain, timeless knowledge. These lines call into question a view of science, of philosophy, and of man's powers that is still widespread. But to claim that these lines offer us *knowledge* and to imply that they communicate a timeless truth would certainly be paradoxical. Their avowed intention is obviously to move the preoccupation with knowledge and timeless truth into a critical perspective by suggesting among other things that what kind of human beings we are is more important than whether we happen to be right or wrong.

If we accepted Lessing's view, the practical implications for humanistic studies would not be damaging. On the contrary, Lessing's outlook could be called essentially humanistic—to the point of viewing even the sciences as human enterprises whose ultimate justification need not lie in the truths or alleged truths they discover. Thinking of science as a search led Goethe to the conception of a history of science, a field of humanistic studies that eventually found a home at many American universities after World War II.

In sum, I have argued that there are several kinds of knowledge available only through humanistic studies, and that such knowledge need not be trivial or antiquarian. On the contrary, the knowledge available only through humanistic studies is as significant as any knowledge could be. But in spite of that I have argued further that some of the most important reasons for teaching the humanities are of a different nature. Let me sharpen the point further. To assume that the reason for teaching or studying the humanities must be to acquire knowledge not available elsewhere is to adopt a scientific, nonhumanistic perspective.

An old tradition contrasts the true with the good and the beautiful. The question about knowledge available through humanistic studies asks about the true. But the humanities are no less concerned with the beautiful and the good and with questions about the nature and status of truth. The humanities deal with the most interesting and important questions, but most people teaching the humanities do not know it.

Some of you may wonder where I stand regarding knowledge. I have tried to show that several kinds of important knowledge

are available only through humanistic studies, but I have also quoted Lessing's moving disparagement of knowledge. A thinker and scholar is often motivated by a sense of outrage at falseness and even more at dishonesty. One wants to expose widely shared errors and get something right. Yet a teacher should not only teach truths. Above all, a teacher in the humanities wants to teach critical thinking—not this or that proposition but an ethos.

NOTES

1. I have drawn on this essay, but revised it extensively, in writing the second chapter of *What is Man?* which is Part III of a trilogy, *Man's Lot*, published by the Reader's Digest Press (1978) and distributed by McGraw-Hill. The three parts are published separately in paperback and in one volume in hard covers. Half of each part consists of the author's color photographs—167 of them in *What is Man?*

2. See *Nobel: The Man and his Prizes*, edited by the Nobel Foundation, 1962.

3. Walter Kaufmann, *The Future of the Humanities* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1977).