

Note on the Subject of Zoom 18 January 2025

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

“As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature. He concedes all that the other affirms, admits the impressions of sense, admits their coherency, their use and beauty, and then asks the materialist for his grounds of assurance that things are as his senses represent them. ...Every materialist will be an idealist; but an idealist can never go backward to be a materialist.”

Corresponding to Emerson’s distinction are two fundamental disciplines—the sciences and the humanities.

Science relies on evidence gathered by the senses and focuses on what is objective, visible, measurable, and often tested. Similarly the social sciences have adopted empirical methodology to further understanding of observable trends, structures, patterns of human behaviors.

The Humanities are by nature subjective and reason, logic, intuition, imagination play essential roles. The subject matter in general is by nature non-quantifiable such as languages, philosophy, poetry, theology, music and fine arts. These subjects are depositories of rich vocabularies, values, sentiments, and ethics. They do not lend themselves to empirical methodology.

In the 21st century there is considerable debate about the value of metaphysical knowledge and there is evidence, particularly in the US, that interest in and pursuit of the humanities is losing ground in society and particularly in universities. There is also a clear separation between the two types of knowledge in light of increasing specialization in the academies. Currently scientific realism and analytic philosophy are dominant sources of knowledge. The reasons are many, notably the rejection of metaphysics by the members of the Vienna Circle from the early 1900’s and onward. Many of David Hume’s suggestions were embraced by the Vienna School, which discounted the value of nonscientific, metaphysical thinking and writings.

Today, physical sciences and technology permit greater possibilities for remunerable employment and other compensations as the best road toward the future. At the same time, in smaller circles, the humanities continue as the study of cultural expressions, beauty in language and music, the search for meaning and values, for means of sharing ideas, and for future challenges that emerge from adversities that challenge the future of humanity. But nature is no longer major part of what was a holistic discussion. It is sadly conflated with the environment in international political circles and captive of the conversation on sustainable development.

It is important to understand that there is need for both the humanities and the sciences in today's world.