
Response: Facts and Values and the Unity of Culture

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The idea that science is or could be value-free is not itself a scientific thesis; it belongs rather to philosophy. I share Giovanni Carsaniga's view that it is a pernicious idea (most deeply in its manifestation in the social sciences), but I would give a different account, even in outline, of how it came to be accepted. He speaks of its connection with the difficulty science had in extricating itself from religious dogma and the need of scientists to find some way of washing their hands of the socially harmful effects of technology. This links the doctrine too closely with science and the practice of science (in the narrow sense which that term has come to assume) and not enough with philosophy and the wider culture to which science belongs and especially with the way in which philosophers as arbiters of culture interpreted the success of mathematical method in science in the seventeenth century. (Of course, many of the philosophers in question—Descartes and Pascal for example—were also leading mathematicians and scientists).

The success of mathematical method in science yielded the idea of the universe as a machine and the related idea of human reason as essentially computational, an instrument for assessing truths of fact and mathematical relations. Reason so conceived could calculate means to ends, but could have no role in assessing ends themselves or the goals and values with which human behaviour might be concerned. The origin of values, which was now placed beyond the scope of reason, had to be located in an external authority (religion, the State) or in emotions and desire shorn of rationality. The most succinct and most famous expression of this dichotomy between reason and value can be found in the words of the amiable and mild-mannered Scottish philosopher David Hume. Working with a conception of reason confined to the assessment of facts and logical relations, Hume wrote in his *Treatise of Human Nature* in 1740:

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'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness to an Indian or person wholly unknown to me. (II,iii,3.)

In short, the idea of the separation of reason and value in our culture—and hence the thesis of a value-free science—is more deeply embedded in the reflections of philosophers than in the practices of scientists; it runs across any possible rift between the arts and the sciences. The more general idea of a critical contrast between facts and values might also have a considerably longer history in western culture.

There is a passage in Plato's short dialogue, *The Euthyphro*, in which Socrates suggests that disputes about number and quantitative matters can be readily settled, whereas disputes about 'the just and the unjust, beautiful and ugly, good and evil' are not subject to a clear decision procedure and often give rise to enmity. Is Plato enunciating here, as some commentators believe, a version of the modern distinction between factual and moral questions? This is to read too much into the passage, for the alleged contrast belongs to a dialectical context in which Socrates is in discussion with someone who claims to know a lot about moral matters, but whose sole criterion of value consists in an appeal to religious authority. Plato had no difficulty in showing that the attempt to ground moral values in this way is unsatisfactory; and his observation of the difficulties in settling moral disputes is invoked to support his point (in this case the prevalence of disagreements among religious authorities). For his own part, Plato would have rejected the modern distinction between facts and values as false and pernicious for he considered that moral disputes are genuinely amenable to resolution. His view of ethics, developed in later dialogues, was of a body of knowledge modelled on mathematics and equally rigorous in its methods, a science with clear decision procedures in regard to good and evil. This vision of ethics is lofty and inspiring and deeply problematic—for in setting standards of rigour which are simply unattainable, it opens the way for a downgrading of ethical inquiry. Plato's inevitable failure in the quest for a mathematical ethics sets the scene for much of the repudiation of ethical inquiry in modern culture. His mistake, as

Aristotle was to argue, was to look for mathematical precision in a domain in which it is inappropriate.

This brief excursion into Greek philosophy is connected with the hint of Platonist elements in Professor Carsaniga's paper. In speaking of Snow's 'Two Cultures' concept he proposes:

Culture, of course, is best seen as a single whole. While the aims and outputs of the arts and sciences may differ, the means and methods whereby knowledge is gained and increased in either branch of intellectual endeavour are, or should be, substantially the same.

At the risk of reading too much into a couple of sentences in a short public address, I suggest that this passage contains a version of the Platonist error to which Aristotle drew attention. Professor Carsaniga's main concern is to insist that inquiries in the arts, no less than in the sciences, should proceed in accordance with rigorous standards in attending to evidence and developing arguments. This is all very well. But why speak of culture being best seen as a *single* whole and of means and methods for acquiring knowledge as substantially the *same*? Given the rigorous character of mathematical procedures and the rightful place of mathematical method in the sciences, the vision of a single standard to be imposed on all forms of inquiry (as central to the quest for a single culture) is in the offing. It is clear that a vision of this sort is indeed currently operative in many branches of the social sciences and in philosophy. But that is a situation which needs to be argued about and resisted rather than applauded, so I would argue. In a spirit of resistance which I applaud, the philosopher Anthony Kenny is critical of the way in which more and more philosophers in recent years 'have attempted to model their studies on the pattern of a rigorously scientific discipline, mimicking the type of precision characteristic of mathematics, and holding up a general theory of linguistics as the ideal for philosophy of language, and an abstract system of artificial intelligence as the goal of philosophy of mind'.¹ Kenny's point is that there are more things in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind than are dreamed of in a philosophy modelled on mathematics. Perhaps there is a strong case

¹Anthony Kenny, *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*, Oxford, 1984, p.viii.

then for seeking to maintain a situation in which, along with some common criteria, there are diverse standards of inquiry, which are nonetheless genuine standards in their field, in a culture which is best seen as diverse rather than a single whole.

This defence of diversity is certainly compatible with the idea espoused by Snow and supported by Carsaniga that scholars in the humanities and the sciences should each know something of the others' fields. Other aspects of Snow's 'Two Cultures' concept and of the reflections on it in *The Arts in a Unified Culture*, would need specific attention. There is a sense in which the concept of two cultures, with its focus on arts and the sciences and the political establishment, is curiously narrow and parsimonious in the age of multi-cultural issues. We should be so lucky! With some additions, of course, our problems grow out of the situation with which Snow was concerned in the late 1950s: how to control technology, the threat of nuclear war, the prospect of eco-disaster precipitated by the massive increase of population, problems of poverty including starvation in many parts of the world, disease of various forms, continuing 'small-scale' wars of staggering brutality, the revival of religious fundamentalism and divisive nationalism.

I am in broad agreement with what Professor Carsaniga says about the disastrous role of 'the technological-financial view of progress' in contributing to many of these problems. I am less convinced, however, by what he says about a literary-philosophical-historical culture which infused the political establishment in the 1950s and which has now crumbled. No doubt there is some distance between the Britain of Harold 'you never had it so good' Macmillan and the 'greed is good' ethos of Margaret Thatcher's green and pleasant and deeply divided land, but one is likely to find that the cultural level of the political establishment is much the same. Elsewhere, Bush is a fair counterpart for Eisenhower, and Gorbachev is vastly superior to Khrushchev; the path from Menzies to Hawke is perhaps another matter. The point once again is that the problems, to the extent that they are of our own making, are deeply embedded in our culture and cannot be accounted for by reference to the character or doings of our political leaders. But this consideration is something of a distraction from the main theme of the paper, viz., that to have any chance of dealing with the immense problems that beset us we need knowledge of the sort science can

provide and, above all, a commitment to the central values found in the arts and the humanities. I have no argument with that, nor with the specific list of values to which Carsaniga draws attention in his paper. Perhaps our agreement could also extend to the following concluding consideration.

We have to recognise that a study of the arts and humanities is likely to throw up conflicting views about the nature of value and to furnish us with conflicting sets of values. The absence of agreement on a common set of values and the fragmented state of modern culture are further components of the problems which beset us. In this situation, the idea of a unified culture marked by a common measure of minds, and some shared set of general beliefs (including perhaps some myths), and commitment to a common set of values, commends itself. At the same time, unity within a culture is not an unalloyed good, as any careful reader of Plato's *Republic* or observer of modern totalitarian states would recognise. Concern with a basic sense of common good, in terms of respect and justice and related values, is necessary across a society and between peoples to overcome harmful factionalism and the damaging effects of fragmentation and to promote the conditions for our wellbeing and the wellbeing of the world of which we are part. But such concern does not require anything like a totally unified community characterised by uniform beliefs and practices and moral unanimity. I do not think that it is best to see culture as a single whole. A society can be best understood, as Aristotle proposed, as a community of communities within which a wide variety of associations and practices can flourish. Some values need to run across the whole of a society, but the unity of a rich culture presupposes the existence of immense diversity.

Rejoinder

GIOVANNI CARSANIGA

I welcome Paul Crittenden's response because, as he himself points out, it is difficult to deal unambiguously with complex issues in the space of a couple of sentences; and what he writes helps me to explain my position. By denying the existence of a dichotomy