

# What's the Use of the Humanities?

## A Primer for the Perplexed

by W. T. JONES

**Q.** First of all, what are the humanities?

**A.** At Caltech the humanities are quite substantial bits of literature and history, and much smaller bits of philosophy and anthropology.

**Q.** Why do you say "at Caltech"?

**A.** Because the humanities mean different things at different institutions. At Oxford the humanities are the classics and nothing but the classics. Others are less restrictive. According to the American Council of Learned Societies, for instance, the humanities are "philosophy (including philosophy of law and philosophy of science), aesthetics, philology, languages, literature, and linguistics, archaeology, art history, musicology, history (including history of science, history of law, and history of religions), cultural anthropology, and folklore."

**Q.** Well, that's certainly inclusive enough. But do all the people in all those disciplines agree? Isn't the ACLS making imperialistic claims for the humanities that philologists, linguists, and archaeologists would reject?

**A.** Yes; many of them do regard themselves as scientists, not humanists. And so do some anthropologists, some philosophers, and some historians — quantitative historians, for instance, and cliometricians. For such people, "humanist" is less a description than a term of abuse.

**Q.** Why are the humanities in such bad odor?

**A.** Humanists are suffering from an identity crisis — they no longer know who they are or why they are. When people ask them what the humanities are *good* for, they feel threatened and react defensively, laying claims to special sensibilities, special insights, from which scientists and other lesser breeds are excluded.

This deceives nobody, probably not even the humanists themselves.

**Q.** Was it ever thus?

**A.** On the contrary. In the 15th century the humanities, so far from being defensive, were progressive and radical, even revolutionary.

**Q.** The 15th century was quite a long time ago.

**A.** How right you are.

**Q.** What was innovative about the humanities then?

**A.** The humanities offered an alternative to the medieval world view, one that substituted reason for revelation, classical authors like Cicero and Quintilian for scholastic authors like Aquinas and Duns Scotus, politics for theology, and more generally, a man-centered world view for a God-centered world view.

**Q.** What went wrong?

**A.** Two things went wrong. In the first place, the humanists did not differ as much from the scholastics as they thought they did. They still conceived the aim of inquiry to be the discovery of an eternal and unchanging essence — they were just interested in a different essence, not the essence of God, but the essence of man. And they still relied heavily on authority — they simply appealed to a different set of authorities.

**Q.** And in the second place?

**A.** In the second place, of course, the humanities were outflanked by what turned out to be a much more radical attack on the medieval world view.

**Q.** You mean Galilean and Newtonian physics?

**A.** Exactly. Of course, this didn't become clear all at once. For a while, it looked as if humanism and natural

science could divide the spoils — the humanists uncovering truths about man by their method and the physicists uncovering truths about nature by their method. But by the 19th century it was clear to everyone except possibly the humanists that if there are indeed any universal truths about human nature they were going to be discovered and formulated by the chemists and biologists, not by humanists.

**Q.** Yet after more than a century humanists and the humanities are still with us.

**A.** Yes. The humanities aren't merely a group of disciplines; they are also a collection of bureaucracies. You know how difficult it is to dislodge entrenched bureaucracies, especially in conservative organizations like colleges and universities. Besides, the humanities weren't very costly; they were luxuries that prosperous colleges and universities could afford. They came to be prized, curiously, just because they had been demonstrated to be useless.

**Q.** You sound rather like Thorstein Veblen.

**A.** Well, I think Veblen was right about conspicuous consumption. The humanities became, along with Newport "cottages," Pierce Arrows, and *Blue Boys*, a mark of wealth and affluence — things it was important to show one could afford to pay for, precisely because they *were* useless.

**Q.** Did the humanists lend themselves to this revised view of their social role?

**A.** I'm afraid many of them fell into it naturally. They became purveyors not of truth but of culture, "the best that has been thought and said." They offered themselves to the public as civilizers of rude but vigorous barbarians. They guaranteed to apply a veneer of culture to the prospective engineers, lawyers, and physicians who were emerging from the universities and who, everyone agreed, were the real makers and shakers of society. But they also guaranteed that the veneer would be thin — it would leave untouched the real technocrat below the surface.

**Q.** Now you sound like Nietzsche.

**A.** You mean that you think I'm harsh. I agree. But I don't believe I'm grossly unfair.

**Q.** You admit that the humanities are not the purveyors of truth that they once claimed to be; you scorn the humanities as the purveyors of culture that they now present themselves as being. What role, then, can you see for the humanities in the contemporary world?

**A.** I think that loosening paradigms is a very important social role, and that the humanities are peculiarly well fitted to loosen paradigms.

**Q.** I haven't the faintest idea what you mean by "loosening paradigms."

**A.** For me a paradigm is simply the world view that happens to be dominant in any society at any particular time. It includes the way of doing science at a particular time and also the particular set of beliefs about the world that are held to be "true" at that time, but it includes more than that — it is the whole perspective, learned at mother's knee and then refined and corrected at school and college, from which one looks at the world. It is a complex lens through which we view the world. This perspective is so pervasive that most of us, most of the time, see through the lens without noticing it. That is, most of us are, metaphysically speaking, naive realists: We assume that the world we see through the lens of our particular paradigm is "out there" just as we happen to see it. To loosen a paradigm is precisely to become aware of the lens, to become aware of the fact that the world we are seeing is merely the world as seen from a particular perspective.

**Q.** You obviously think there is something noble and virtuous about loosening paradigms. Why?

**A.** You are putting words in my mouth. I am only saying that naive realism, as I have defined it, is a dysfunctional metaphysical attitude, especially in periods of rapid change. Naive realism and cognitive innovation are mutually incompatible, because people who believe that their view of the world is not a view, but the world itself, find it easy to reject alternative views as "obviously" false. And so they are likely to regard the innovators themselves with deep suspicion, not only mistaken but also somehow immoral. When one looks back over the history of Western culture, one hardly knows whether to laugh or to weep. What we see is a sequence in which an innovation is first rejected with scorn and contempt, then grudgingly tolerated, then generally accepted. At this point the cycle begins again. The new paradigm now deals with innovations as it was once dealt with — it condemns them as errors, instead of welcoming them as alternatives. The psychological and sociological costs to all parties are high. What I am saying is only that paradigm looseness can reduce these costs a bit.

**Q.** Now you sound rather like Wittgenstein.

**A.** You mean what he says about wanting to help the fly escape from the fly bottle?

**Q.** Yes. Aren't you saying that we are, all of us, imprisoned in those fly bottles that he called "forms of life"?

**A.** Yes, but Wittgenstein equated a form of life with a language — "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life," he said; and he believed that the linguistic therapy he practiced in *Philosophical Investigations* would free us from our fly bottles. For my part, I am less optimistic. The most seductive, the most dangerous, of all fly bottles is one which has a label, printed on the inside of the bottle, "I am not a fly bottle." Doubtless an exceptional fly now and then escapes from his fly bottle, but his period of free buzzing is likely to be short; sooner or later he lands in another bottle. As for the average, run-of-the-mill fly, the most that can be done is to help him come to some realization that he is stuck in a fly bottle, and the way to do this is to show him other flies in other fly bottles.

**Q.** What, if anything, has this to do with education?

**A.** I am saying that one of the great aims of education should be to help students to learn how to enjoy — enjoy, not merely tolerate — cognitive dissonance, cognitive ambiguity. The present educational system is very good at teaching students the particular tricks of their particular trade — those parts of the dominant paradigm of their time that they need to know in order to be successful engineers, lawyers, physicians, or philosophers. It tends, however, to leave them the naive realists they were when they entered as freshmen; indeed, the better a university is at teaching relevant portions of the dominant paradigm, the more likely it is actually to foster naive realism. We should certainly continue to teach the relevant parts of the dominant paradigm — obviously we want an educational system that produces highly competent engineers, lawyers, physicians, and even, I suppose, philosophers. But we should also encourage paradigm looseness. We want an educational system that does not allow its graduates to live within their various competences as in a castle, protected by moat and drawbridge, but one that encourages them to look outside, even on occasion to step outside and view their castle from without.

**Q.** I still don't see how you would design a system that would produce the attitudes you desire, nor what role you envisage for the humanities in it.

**A.** I think that the educational system should be based on the principle of the joke.

**Q.** The joke? Surely you're joking?

**A.** No; I'm serious. Or rather, I'm making a serious

point, but choosing to make it by making a joke — granted, only a small one — about jokes.

**Q.** Please explain.

**A.** I recall a cartoon I saw in *The New Yorker* a few years ago, published during the hunting season. There is a drawing of a car speeding down a road in a forest, returning from a successful expedition. The hunter is lying prostrate across the hood of the car, and in the driver's seat is a debonair, slightly smirking deer, antlers and all.

**Q.** Ha, ha.

**A.** Thank you. If you were actually a bit amused, that is because you aren't a literal-minded person. If you were literal minded, you would not smile; you would say in a puzzled way, "But deer can't drive." (To be literal-minded about jokes is to be a very, very naive realist.) To be able to see the point of that joke you have to be able to shift, however momentarily, from your normal perspective to a different one. The shift is not just from the perspective of a human being to that of a deer; the deer, after all, is behaving exactly like a man. No; the shift is from the perspective of a hunter, whether man or deer, to that of the hunted, whether deer or man. Most of the time we — you and I — are comfortably and securely located in an upper-middle-class perspective, one in which we are either actual or potential hunters. What the cartoon does is to jolt us out of this familiar perspective and project us briefly into another. All jolts — this is the point of my joke about jokes — are liberating.

**Q.** Well, suppose I accept your analysis of jokes. What then?

**A.** In the case of this joke, the jolt is small, but small as it is, it is nonetheless liberating; that is why we smile. Bigger shifts in perspective cause bigger jolts; very big jolts may be experienced as alarming, not as amusing. What we want is an educational system that helps people learn how to cope with very big jolts — to experience them as exhilarating, instead of as threatening, that helps people to welcome jolts instead of encouraging them to retreat from them.

**Q.** I suppose that what I want from you at this point is an example of a very big joke, one that is relevant to the educational system.

**A.** Very well. Consider Galileo's report of his discoveries during January 1610, when, as he says, "I betook myself to observation of the heavenly bodies . . . On the 7th day of January the planet Jupiter presented itself

to my view.” What he saw that night was this — two pinpoints of light just to the left of Jupiter and one to the right:



On the 8th he saw this:



On the 10th (the 9th was cloudy and he could not observe) this:



And on the 11th this:



Anyone who interpreted his experience from the perspective of the medieval world view — and that was still the dominant perspective in 1610 — would have had quite a jolt when he saw those pinpoints of light move. For what he would have perceived, in terms of that perspective, were not pinpoints of light but fixed stars — fixed stars that moved. How could this be? We must suppose, therefore, that Galileo had a high tolerance for cognitive dissonance; indeed, that he even enjoyed it. When, on the second night, he saw that the pinpoints of light which shouldn't — indeed, couldn't — move, had nonetheless moved, he was not frightened; he was curious. He looked forward “with longing,” he says, to his next opportunity to observe. How different was this reaction from that of those professors at the University of Padua who were naive realists. Imbedded as they were in their world view (which they of course did not regard as a mere world view), they knew that the pinpoints of light which couldn't move didn't move. Galileo's claim that fixed stars move was so threatening that they refused to look through his telescope.

**Q.** Yes; that was indeed a joke on a cosmological scale. The jolt was so great that it is still reverberating.

**A.** And literal-minded people are still not amused.

**Q.** If I understand you, you are maintaining that, though there is an enormous difference in scale, there is no difference in principle between seeing the point of a joke or a pun and shifting from a geocentric to a heliocentric world view.

**A.** That is certainly part of what I am saying. But I am also pointing out the rather obvious but important fact that one can shift perspectives only when one recognizes that it is only a perspective that is shifting — not the world itself. That is the utility of paradigm looseness.

**Q.** Granting all that, I still fail to see how the humanities come in.

**A.** Really? I have been saying that one of the great tasks of the educational system is to make the largely invisible dominant paradigm visible, and that what is needed to make it visible is an alternative paradigm. Well, the dominant part of the dominant paradigm today is surely scientific. To isolate and to control changes in variables, to quantify, to design abstract models that have predictive power — these are ways of coping with experience that have come to seem natural, even inevitable. So much so that what cannot be handled by these means — what, as it were, is not in focus through these lenses — seems to us to be “subjective,” “private,” or even “illusory.” We see it, but we don't believe it, just as Galileo's colleagues saw those moving pinpoints of light but wrote them off as unreal, possibly black magic. In such circumstances it seems to me useful and important to have available a paradigm in which what is “unreal” in the dominant paradigm comes into focus. In the 17th century that alternative paradigm was the heliocentric hypothesis. Today it is the humanities.

**Q.** If I understand you, you aren't attributing any special virtue to the humanities; they are effective paradigm-looseners only because they happen to be alternatives to the dominant paradigm.

**A.** I agree that any alternative to a dominant paradigm is a loosener. When, as in the 16th century, the humanistic paradigm was dominant, the natural sciences played a useful role as paradigm looseners. But I also think that the humanities are particularly well fitted to serve as paradigm looseners. This is because it is their nature to present alternative paradigms. Take anthropology, for instance. Anthropology displays to us societies whose behaviors and whose belief systems differ greatly from our own but in which nonetheless a coherent life — a good life — is possible, a life at least as functional for those societies as ours is for us. Take literature: *Lear* and *Hamlet*, the *Oedipus* and the *Antigone*, present us with alternative life styles, alternative systems of value, and present them in such a way that we come to understand them from within, not merely contemplate them from without, empathize with them, even while rejecting them as models we want to follow. To understand while rejecting — that is precisely what I mean by loosening a paradigm; not abandoning, loosening. Take history: In contrast to anthropology, which shows us contemporary societies different from our own, history loosens our own current Western paradigm by

disclosing how much it has evolved and changed over time. Take philosophy: When I ask students to read Plato's *Republic*, I say, "Concentrate on the places where he seems to you to be talking utter nonsense; those are the important points. Assume that he was a reasonably intelligent man; if you can discover why what seems to you gibberish made sense to him, you will have uncovered a difference in fundamental assumptions."

**Q.** But you surely don't want your students to abandon their own assumptions and adopt Plato's?

**A.** Of course not. That would be to leap from one fly bottle to another. But to make explicit a set of assumptions which one didn't even recognize to be assumptions, because everyone one knows has made them too — that seems to me a useful learning experience.

**Q.** As nearly as I can make out, you are arguing that the humanities are good paradigm-looseners precisely because they don't make truth claims. But surely historians and anthropologists — and for all I know, philosophers — do make truth claims, don't they?

**A.** That depends. Certainly some historians believe that the job of history is to ascertain what really happened in the past. I think that we should classify historians who take this view of their discipline as social scientists. After all, I said at the start that some historians firmly reject the epithet "humanist," and I think they do this precisely because they are making truth claims. But other historians agree that history is at best no more than a likely story; I think what I have been saying about the humanities applies to them. It also applies to any anthropologists and philosophers who take a similar view of their disciplines.

**Q.** Perhaps. I do not know enough about these studies. But I still think that your best case is literature.

**A.** Very well; I won't debate this with you. My point is simply that as long as humanists think of themselves as purveyors of truth, they only offer us rival fly bottles, fly bottles that few people today have much confidence in. There is no point, as I see it, in loosening one paradigm — whatever it may be — if, at the end of the loosening process, the fly is only lodged in another fly bottle. That is what went wrong in the 15th century, when the humanists, not content merely to loosen the medieval paradigm, claimed to have discovered the truth about human nature.

**Q.** But once humanists free themselves from the burden

of making truth claims about human nature, they are free — this is your point, is it not? — to concentrate on what they are particularly well fitted for, a study of the variety of paradigms by means of which over the ages men have organized their world.

**A.** Yes. Man is characteristically — not uniquely, but characteristically — an animal with culture. That is, his experience of the world, his interaction with the world, is mediated not merely by memories but by more or less complex systems of signs. Though we all know this, we are always forgetting it. The system of signs that we habitually use grows so familiar that it becomes invisible. At that point we are in danger of falling into the sin, to speak metaphorically and humanistically for a moment, of thinking of ourselves as gods. The social function of humanists is to recall us to an understanding of our humbler status as men.

**Q.** But aren't you, in a way, agreeing with those who describe humanists as purveyors of culture?

**A.** Yes, if you think of culture as a system of signs; no, if you think of culture as a thin veneer. It is a matter of what perspective, what paradigm, you use for thinking about culture.

**Q.** So you don't claim that what you have been saying about the humanities is true?

**A.** God forbid!

**Q.** If you haven't been trying to tell us what you think is true about the humanities, what on earth do you think you have been doing?

**A.** Oh, I have been making a joke about the humanities.

**Q.** A joke?

**A.** Yes; a small joke — not quite so small as *The New Yorker* joke about the deer driving the hunter's car, but still a tiny joke compared to Galileo's joke about the fixed stars that moved. And I suppose that, after all, I am making a kind of truth claim for what I have been saying. I think that what I've been saying about the humanities is true in the same sense that one might call a joke "true" if it calls people's attention to some feature of their experience that they have been overlooking.

**Q.** You mean that you want to jolt people at Caltech out of what you suspect is the normal Caltech view of the humanities and into a different one?

**A.** Yes, exactly. And not only scientists; humanists too.

**Q.** Do you think you'll succeed?

**A.** Ah.