TWO BODIES, ONE CULTURE

Speech by the President of the British Academy
given at the Centenary Dinner of the British Academy, 4 July 2002

We are here tonight to commemorate the signature of the British Academy's Charter by King Edward VII on the eve of his coronation on the 8th of August 1902 – a day which Lord Reay, the first of my predecessors, described in consequence as 'singularly appropriate and of good omen'. But the story effectively begins in November 1899 when the Secretaries of the Royal Society decided to take advice about the possible establishment of an Academy to represent Britain in the 'Literature, Antiquities, and Philosophy' section of a new International Association of Academies. In the debates and discussions which followed opinion was, unsurprisingly, divided. There were those on one side who held that the Royal Society had been created to promote all forms of learning, and that subjects such as Psychology, Economics, History, and Philology, 'when practised as they now are by the most capable students, in a scientific spirit and by scientific methods', did fall within 'the Domain of Natural Knowledge'. But they were strenuously opposed by those who maintained that the Royal Society had been founded to promote 'experimental philosophy to the exclusion of philosophy of other kinds'; and the alternative option put by Henry Sidgwick, whereby the Royal Society would address a 'memorial' to Government pointing out the lack of an Academy which covered fields outside of mathematics and natural science and advocating its creation, was the one which found favour.

So here we are. But the issues debated among and between the grandees of Edwardian science and scholarship had a history going back well before Queen Victoria's death. Two parallel debates, of which both are with us still, had been in full cry for several decades. The first concerned the relation between *Wissenschaft* – science and scholarship taken together – on the one side and the literary or other artistic expression of views of the world and the human condition on the other. The second concerned the relationship within *Wissenschaft* between the natural and the human sciences. By the second half of the nineteenth century, both the distinction between the 'scientist' and the 'artist' and the related distinction between the supposed objectivity of the scientist and the Romantically proclaimed subjectivity of the artist were well entrenched in German, French, and English alike; and during the last quarter of it, the arguments over the relation of the natural sciences to what

Dilthey had christened the *Geisteswissenschaften* was building up into the *Methodenstreit*, so called, which rumbled on in the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* and elsewhere up to 1914. In Britain, meanwhile, both issues had been memorably aired in Matthew Arnold's Rede Lecture of 1882, in which he argued on the one hand that 'a genuine humanism is scientific' but insisted on the other that science has to yield to literature when it comes to 'putting us into relation', as he phrased it, with our aesthetic and moral sense.

But let me move fast forward to 1959 and the Rede Lecture delivered in the very same Senate House in Cambridge by Sir Charles (C.P.) Snow. The reasons for that lecture's surprising *réclame* have been well set out by Stefan Collini in his Introduction to the Cambridge Press edition of 1993. For myself, I thought it an odd performance when I read it at the time; and on re-reading it over forty years later, I have to say that I have found it intellectually crass, politically naïve, historically short-sighted, and rhetorically inept. The stereotypes of the foolish, reactionary man of letters and the sensible, progressive man of science are little short of absurd, and the equation of scholarship with literature is just as misleading as T. H. Huxley's irritating equation, as Arnold saw it, of what Arnold called 'all knowledge that reaches us through books' with *belles lettres*. It seems never to have occurred to Snow to wonder whether Crick and Watson's unravelling of the double helix, for all its wider repercussions, might be no more remarkable a cryptographic achievement than the decoding by Ventris and Chadwick of Linear B – particularly when one remembers that Linus Pauling might have beaten Crick and Watson to it, whereas Ventris was initially convinced that the solution to his problem could not possibly be what he and Chadwick went on to prove that it was, i.e. that Linear B is a form of Greek. Then there is Snow's belated attempt, in his Postscript to his original lecture, to take account of the social sciences by labelling them a 'third' culture without any serious articulation of their relations with his other two. He pays tribute to some of the early work of the Cambridge school of historical demography, but he has nothing to say about archaeology or linguistics or developmental or cognitive psychology or human geography or social statistics. And finally, there is the nice irony that Snow used ignorance of the Second Law of Thermodynamics as a stick with which to beat the litterateurs without mentioning that one of Leavis's favourite novelists, Conrad, was only too well aware of it and of what Conrad saw as its dismaying implications for the long-term descent of the universe into a terminal darkness, silence, and cold.

Some of you may by now suspect that I am taking a base pleasure in rubbishing a dead white establishment male who can't answer back. But I am well aware that my own view of the matter may be just as heartily rubbished in similar terms by whoever may have

occasion to read it when I too am a dead white establishment male forty years from now. All I claim is that it ought to be possible in 2002 to do a better job in discussing these perennially important issues than Snow did in 1959.

Let me therefore put to you two related propositions. The first is that there is indeed a fundamental difference between the natural and the human sciences, since people, and the minds inside their heads, are indeed a very special kind of thing. But it is a difference within a common epistemology, not between one epistemology and another. My suggestion will not be acceptable on the one side to the grand reductionists who still dream of a single physical science to which the biological and human sciences stand alike in the relation of applied to pure. Nor will it be acceptable on the other side to those who still hold that the difference is between the value-laden, subjective human sciences on the one side and the value-neutral, objective natural sciences on the other. But to the first, the short answer is that you cannot hope to explain the behaviour of self-conscious beings who carry in their heads an elaborate culturally and socially constructed ontology in the same way that you can the behaviour of rocks or trees or earthworms (our chimpanzee cousins being the intriguing borderline case). And to the second, the short answer is that both the natural *and* the human sciences are both objective *and* subjective, since both are at the same time value-neutral in so far as their results are directly and publicly testable and value-laden in so far as their underlying presuppositions and purposes are not. Both share the same two inescapable requirements: first, reasoned argument as opposed to dogmatic assertion; and second, what one of the most distinguished of many distinguished 20th-century British historians, David Knowles, called 'docility to the evidence'. Any serious practitioner of either the human or the natural sciences has no need to be told that there are no canonical narratives or definitive theories of everything. We all know perfectly well that we are not the passive observers of a world of unmistakable patterns and sequences of objects and events which have only to be looked at with a clear and steady eye in order for them to reveal themselves for what they are. But we are equally aware that the world of which we are ourselves a part cannot be explained as we choose in accordance with our own expectations, prejudices, or desires. Whatever reservations may need to be entered about so-called positivist philosophy of science, Huxley's gibe against Herbert Spencer is as pertinent as ever: a tragedy is a theory killed by a fact.

My second proposition is that there is indeed a fundamental difference between *Wissenschaft* on one side and art on the other, but not the unbridgeable divide that both the Positivists and their Romantic antagonists took it to be a century or more ago. Literature can

be used to convey observations and hypotheses about why the world is as we find it, just as the art of rhetoric can be put to use in the formulation and presentation of the findings of *Wissenschaft*. Similarly, the imaginative intuitions which find expression in many different branches of *Wissenschaft* can be recognized as not so very different from those which find expression in poetry, painting, or music. But the artist is not, need not, and should not be constrained by either reasoned argument or docility to the evidence. As Eliot said, all great poetry 'gives the illusion of a view of life'; and it can be accepted as doing so even by readers who not only fail to share, but actively repudiate, the particular poet's particular view. The appeal of 'great' art in the cultures within which it passes into tradition as such is not a function of its ability to withstand attempts to replicate or disconfirm it. If it helps to put Matthew Arnold and others into relation with their aesthetic and moral sense, it doesn't make someone for whom it doesn't into a comical intransigent like Kingsley Amis's landlady who, some of you may remember, categorically refused to accept that the fire in the grate gives out the same amount of heat whether or not the curtains are drawn. The dictum which to my mind says it all is that of the 19th-century French physiologist Claude Bernard: '*L'art c'est moi, la science c'est nous*'.

In quoting that, I have not forgotten that through the intellectual history of the twentieth century there runs a steady groundswell of scepticism about any claims by the practitioners of *Wissenschaft* to anything more than knowledge which is parochial to the historically contingent and culturally conditioned community within which it is taken to be valid. But we can all accept the parochial aspect of knowledge – or, as Peter Burke has warned us to say, knowledges – and the epistemological underdetermination of even the best-tested theories without being thereby driven to conclude that *Wissenschaft* is the mythical construction of arbitrary conclusions about a phantom world. We can acknowledge that the confident, not to say complacent, assumptions of the late-Victorian ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* were significantly compromised during the 20th century without abandoning the prediction that 21st-century physics will not be a reversion to Aristotle's, that 21st-century molecular biology will not reincorporate Bergson's *élan vital*, that 21st-century criminology will not reinstate phrenological theory, and that 21st-century historical demographers will not agree with the Reverend Thomas Jackson that pestilence was providentially directed against those of 'covetous minds'. Even the self-styled annihilator *par excellence*, Nietzsche, is explicit that although there is no absolute Truth with a capital T there are certain truths which are so far established as to rank among what he characteristically calls the 'irrefutable errors of mankind'. For all the differences across time

and place in what is accepted as true or false – and which it is one of the tasks of *Wissenschaft* to report and explain – there are, with due respect to Pascal, a great many things which are included among the irrefutable errors of mankind on both sides of the Pyrenees.

Not all of you, I dare say, will agree with all that I have so far, and all too summarily, said. But whatever view any of you may take of these matters and of the Academy's part in them, I do not see how it would be possible to dispute the continuing importance of what the Academy was founded to do – to maintain the standards which give it its *raison d'être*, to promote the disciplines which it represents, and to help make available their results to the widest possible audience. Practical application of those results, however and wherever it may happen, is not our direct concern. Nor should it be, any more than the Academy should seek to pronounce about issues of public policy outside of its own recognized interests and competence. The Academy is about intellectual excellence first and foremost, and about influence on policy second and indirectly. If anyone is worried that in saying this I am making us sound elitist, I can only reply that I cannot understand how that word could, in this context, be so construed as to imply a criticism. It would be as inappropriate for me to apologize for the achievements of the Fellows of the Academy over the past hundred years in the world of knowledges as it would in the world of sport for the Australian cricket selectors to apologize for fielding a team with a test match average of over 40 down to number 7 in the batting order. I do not believe that any of the successive governments on whose support the British Academy and the Royal Society both depend has been, is, or will be, indifferent, let alone hostile, to the achievement of the highest levels of scientific and scholarly, as of artistic and sporting, success that talent, training, application, and the necessary financial backing can enable the country to achieve.

This, however, is the moment at which I feel bound to confess, with the appropriate mixture of diffidence and defiance, that I am well aware both that I am the first sociologist to be elected President of the British Academy, and that sociologists in the academic community are like viola players in the musical community: all the best-known – I don't say, best – jokes are at our expense. I was a graduate student under our eminent Corresponding Fellow Robert K. Merton at Columbia when I first heard the one about a sociologist being a person who needs a foundation grant to find the way to the red light district, it was in Chicago that I first heard the one about sociology being the subject where the counters don't think and the thinkers don't count, and it was in Cambridge last year that I first heard the one about departments of cultural studies being invented to give sociologists something to look down on. But it is a sociologist – the one whom Raymond Aron used to call not just the greatest

sociologist, but *the* sociologist – whose lecture of 1919 to a student audience in Munich on *Wissenschaft* as a vocation has stood the test of time in the way that Snow's Rede Lecture of 1959 has not. Max Weber wholeheartedly shared Arnold's view that a genuine humanism is 'scientific'. For him, a natural scientist working on the atomic structure of the chemical elements is no different from a philologist obsessed with the definitive correction of a corrupt passage in a disputed text. All practitioners of *Wissenschaft*, as Weber sees them, have to recognize that their findings can never amount to absolute and timeless certainties, that there is no transcendental value which attaches to the practice of *Wissenschaft*, and that students or any other audiences who look to their academic mentors for authoritative answers to the age-old questions What shall we do? And how shall we live? will look in vain. But he is wholly uncompromising about what the practice of *Wissenschaft* requires from those who choose to dedicate themselves to it – intellectual integrity, tenacity of purpose, respect for alternative viewpoints, and a consistent refusal to be influenced by personal popularity, journalistic fashion, or inducements or sanctions from rulers or their acolytes. You may fairly respond that all that is easier said than done, and I agree. Likewise, although we all know Housman's maxim that accuracy is a duty, not a virtue, if there are persons here present who have never allowed into print over their names a more than trivial error of both fact and judgement, I can only say that I am not one of your happy company. But we can, all of us, recognize the values which the British Academy and Royal Society represent and proclaim our collective commitment to them.

That is as true in 2002 as it was in 1902. But there is one difference between then and now which invites a comment. *Wissenschaft* has become an increasingly public activity in a double sense. It is not just that the works of its practitioners are, as they have always been, at the mercy of potential invalidation in a way that the works of artists are not. It is also that the private practitioner of independent means with a library in the attic or a laboratory in the cellar is becoming increasingly, if not totally, a creature of the past. Nothing, to be sure, prevents another Fermat from scribbling down conjectures in number theory in the intervals of performing his judicial duties or another Gibbon from settling down in Lausanne to rewrite the conventional view of some famous sequence of historical events. Nor is it the case that no significant contribution to one or another of our current knowledges can be achieved except in a publicly funded university or laboratory or library or museum or institute of research. But the world in which the overwhelming majority of the Fellows of both the British Academy and the Royal Society follow their vocation of *Wissenschaft* is a world dependent on taxpayers' money. That the money must be, and be seen to be, properly spent

goes without saying. But it will not be properly spent unless it is paid in such a way that the recipients, once identified as likely to do the best job in a purely intellectual sense, are then left to get on with it by themselves. Application of new knowledge is another matter: successive governments are fully entitled to say how they want the findings of science and scholarship translated into practical prescriptions and programmes and to channel their resources accordingly. But discoveries can never be made to order, and the outcomes of original research can never be predicted in advance. A knowledge society, as it is nowadays called, must be a society in which scholars and scientists owe to the state the same obligations as any other citizen, but the state recognizes their right to pursue their vocation of *Wissenschaft* without any restrictions beyond those imposed by best practice and the law of the land. New knowledges may, for inescapable reasons, be much more costly to achieve than they used to be; but the political conditions which will best promote their achievement are the same today as they were in 1902.

We could have no more welcome or more appropriate guest speaker on the occasion of our anniversary than the current President of the Royal Society, Lord May – a theoretical physicist in his early career who then brought to population biology and theoretical ecology a flair, irreverence, and analytical skill which have been memorably described in the late W. D. Hamilton's autobiographical prefaces to his own collected papers. To the succession of distinguished academic positions he has held in Australia, Britain, and the United States, Lord May added that of Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government from 1995 to 2000; and he ought, in my view, to be in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* for the dictum, which I have myself heard him pronounce, that the television series *Yes, Minister* is, in his words, 'a documentary, not a sitcom'. On which note, may I ask the Fellows of the Academy to rise to the toast of The Royal Society, its President, Lord May, and all of our distinguished guests.

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