

humanities

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those branches of knowledge that concern themselves with human beings and their culture or with analytic and critical methods of inquiry derived from an appreciation of human values and of the unique ability of the human spirit to express itself. As a group of educational disciplines, the humanities are distinguished in content and method from the physical and biological sciences and, somewhat less decisively, from the social sciences. The humanities include the study of all languages and literatures, the arts, history, and philosophy. The humanities are sometimes organized as a school or administrative division in many colleges and universities in the United States.

The modern conception of the humanities has its origin in the classical Greek *paideia*, a course of general education dating from the sophists in the mid-5th century BC, which prepared young men for active citizenship in the polis, or city-state; and in Cicero's *humanitas* (literally, "human nature"), a program of training proper for orators, first set forth in *De Oratore* (*Of the Orator*) in 55 BC. In the early Middle Ages the Church Fathers, including St. Augustine, himself a rhetorician, adapted *paideia* and *humanitas*—or the *bonae* ("good"), or *liberales* ("liberal"), arts, as they were also called—to a program of basic Christian education; mathematics, linguistic and philological studies, and some history, philosophy, and science were included.

The word *humanitas*, although not the substance of its component disciplines, dropped out of common use in the later Middle Ages but underwent a flowering and a transformation in the Renaissance. The term *studia humanitatis* ("studies of humanity") was used by 15th-century Italian humanists to denote secular literary and scholarly activities (in grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, moral philosophy, and ancient Greek and Latin studies) that the humanists thought to be essentially humane and classical studies rather than divine ones. In the 18th century, Denis Diderot and the French Encyclopédistes censured *studia humanitatis* for what they claimed had by then become its dry, exclusive concentration on Latin and Greek texts and language. By the 19th century, when the purview of the humanities expanded, the humanities had begun to take their identity not so much from their separation from the realm of the divine as from their exclusion of the material and methods of the maturing physical sciences, which tended to examine the world and its phenomena objectively, without reference to human meaning and purpose.

Modern problems.

Contemporary conceptions of the humanities resemble earlier conceptions in that they propose a complete educational program based on the propagation of a self-sufficient system of human values. But they differ in that they also propose to distinguish the humanities from the social sciences as well as from the physical sciences, and in that they dispute among themselves as to whether an emphasis on the subject matter or on the methods of the humanities is most effectual in accomplishing this distinction. In the late 19th century the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey called the humanities "the spiritual sciences" and "the human sciences" and described them, simply, as those areas of knowledge that lay outside of, and beyond, the subject matter of the physical sciences. On the other hand, Heinrich Rickert, a turn-of-the-century Neo-Kantian, argued that it is not subject matter but method of investigation that best characterizes the humanities; Rickert contended that whereas the physical sciences aim to move from particular instances to general laws, the human sciences are "idiographic"—they are devoted to the unique value of the particular within its cultural and human contexts and do not seek general laws.

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