

## **Lecture 3: An Overview of Human Sciences**

### **3.1. What are Human Sciences/the Humanities?**

The humanities are the study of what it means to be human. Subjects within the humanities look at human existence, history, culture, thought and creativity. For example, someone who tries to understand what happened in the past is studying history. Someone who tries to understand how traditions or social practices (for example, marriage) differ between cultures is studying anthropology.

Like the natural sciences and the social sciences, the humanities are a body of knowledge. They deal with the study of man's intellectual and aesthetic creations. Subjects that fall within the humanities include literature, philosophy, religion, art, and music.

The study of man through the humanities tends to focus on man as an individual, in uniqueness and variety. The study of the social sciences and indeed the humanities often reflects man's values.

### **3.2. Importance of Studying Human Sciences?**

Studying the humanities helps us to think about, and understand, what it means to be human. Subjects like history and philosophy help us to think critically about where ideas about human knowledge and behaviour have come from. Those subjects also encourage us to think about how the world should be and how people should behave.

The humanities also help us to appreciate human creativity. Thinking creatively has contributed to scientific discovery, law, arts, music and literature. Critical and creative thinking are skills that are also useful in the social and natural sciences.

### **3.3. The Disciplines of Human Sciences**

The human sciences cover a wide range of disciplines, the most important of which include philosophy, anthropology, history, languages, literature, art and music:

- **Anthropology** is the study of cultures and societies, and how people across different cultures organise their lives and relationships. The word *anthropos* in Ancient Greek means "human being" or "person". The goal of anthropology is to provide a holistic account of humans and human nature. It includes the study of family systems, religions, traditions, food or clothes, etc. Although anthropologists generally specialize in only one sub-field, they always keep in mind the biological, linguistic, historic and cultural aspects of any

problem. Anthropology is also included within social science subjects because it can include study of societies and social behaviour.

- **History** is the continuous, systematic narrative and research into past human events as interpreted through historiographical paradigms or theories. It is the study of events and people in the past. People who study history are called historians. Historians try to find out about the past through documents, pictures and objects from the past. The spoken or recorded recollections of people from the past are also a valuable source of information for historians. There is not one 'correct' version of history. It is not just a list of dates and events. There are many different interpretations of what has happened in the past. A historian tries to understand these and choose the most likely version(s) of what happened, based on the evidence they have.

History falls somewhere between the social sciences and humanities. In the early 20th century, most historians considered their discipline a social science because they used — and still use — quantitative tools to understand the past. In recent decades, however, a growing number of historians have begun to refer to their field as a humanities subject due to the fact that they study the history of culture and human values. While many colleges today group the history department with other social sciences, some consider it a humanities field.

- The **study of languages** includes the study of reading, writing, speaking and listening in our own or in other languages. The study of other languages can help increase our understanding of the culture, the literature, and the social and religious backgrounds of its speakers.

- **Literature** is the study of written works such as poetry, novels or biographies. It can also involve studying and practising creative writing.

- **Philosophy** is the study of thought and ideas about existence, knowledge and morality. It emphasizes foundational questions about reality, human nature, and the relationship between mind and matter. Philosophy majors use logic and critical theory to address topics such as morality, the external world, art, and objectivity. It is central to social sciences and to humanities. Many social science disciplines look to the principles of philosophy to try to understand human behaviour, morality's impact on decision-making, and the development of social institutions.

The study of the very basis of reality and existence is a branch of philosophy called metaphysics. Metaphysics goes beyond what we can know just from physical evidence. For

example, metaphysics asks whether there are other dimensions of space or time beyond those we currently know of. The study of knowledge itself is called epistemology. It asks questions about knowledge, what it is, how we gain it and whether we can truly know what we think we know. There is also a branch of philosophy that asks questions about our actions. For example, what the right way to behave is or how we should treat other people, animals or the environment. This is called ethics. We use ethics in our daily life, often without realising it. For example, we might reject a plastic bag from a shop because we believe plastic bags are bad for the environment. Or, we might not eat meat because we believe it is wrong to kill animals. In making these types of decisions we are thinking about what we believe is right or wrong, and why. We are making decisions about ethics.

**Exercise 1:** Answer the questions.

1. Which is the best summary of the reasons for why people study the humanities?
  - a. The humanities help us study history and literature.
  - b. The humanities encourage us to think critically and creatively.
  - c. The humanities tell us about different traditions in society.
  - d. The humanities are where we learn other languages.
2. Match examples a-e to the human sciences
  - a. Writing poetry.
  - b. Learning to speak Chinese.
  - c. Looking at different marriage traditions.
  - d. Deciding what is right or wrong.
  - e. Looking for causes of a war in the past.
3. Why is it hard to be certain about the past?
4. What are advantages of studying other languages?

**Exercise 2:** Answer the questions.

1. Which branch of philosophy studies how we gain knowledge?
2. Which branch of philosophy considers the question of whether we have a soul?
3. What are we doing when we think about the right way to treat other people?
4. Match questions a-c (below) to the three branches of philosophy.
  - a. Is it ever acceptable to tell a lie?
  - b. How can we be sure that we really know something?
  - c. Is there a part of us that lives on after we die?

### **3.2. Relationship Between Human and Social Sciences**

The humanities are closely related to social science in that both deal with humans and their culture. Social science, however, is most concerned with those basic elements of culture that determine the general patterns of human behaviour. The humanities deal with special aspects of human culture and are primarily concerned with the attempts to express spiritual and aesthetic values and to discover the meaning of life. Whereas the social sciences study issues in a systematic, scientific way, the focus of the humanities is more on the emotions and feelings themselves than on the system employed to sharpen that focus. The importance of social science goes far beyond the specific social sciences. It is social science thinking that underlies much of the law, as well as, our understanding of international relations and government. All these fields are the natural by-products of social science inquiry. Thus, knowledge of social science is necessary for anyone trying to understand current world events.

Finally, there is a lot of crossover between humanities and social science subjects. Through history we can see how the societies, politics and economics of the past influence the societies, politics and economics of the present. People's cultures, beliefs, languages, literature and traditions also influence their philosophy, politics, economics and development.