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RECENT TRENDS IN THE HUMANITIES

By Dr. WALDO G. LELAND
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF LEARNED SOCIETIES

I

We may, if we like, think of all knowledge as assuming the form of a triangle, of which one apex is occupied by the natural and physical sciences, another by the social sciences and the third by the humanities. The natural and physical sciences deal with man's environment, the most remote as well as the most immediate; the social sciences with man in his associations with other men; while the humanities concern themselves with the manifestations of his spiritual existence.

The figure of the triangle is convenient in that it emphasizes the close union of all three fields of study, between which no definite boundaries can be drawn. The natural sciences are complemented by the humanities, and the latter find their extension in the social sciences, which must depend upon them, as well as upon the natural and physical sciences, for fundamental data. For the humanities man is inseparable from his physical environment and from his associations. Not even by ascending into the stratosphere can he escape from either.

The task of the humanities is to recover all that may be recovered of the spiritual experience of mankind, throughout the ages of human history and throughout the entire scene of human activity, and to interpret this experience for the enrichment of life as it must be lived in the present.

The data of the humanities are all the manifestations of the spiritual life of man, expressed in spoken or written language, or in artistic, musical or other action. Their methods are historical and descriptive; whether they are true sciences or whether they are something less and at the same time something more does not greatly matter. Their validity depends upon the selection, critical study and appraisal of their

1 Address of the retiring vice-president and chairman of Section L—Historical and Philological Sciences, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Boston, December, 1933.
Editor's Summary

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