In the midst of the Cold War, more precisely on 7 May 1959, the English scientist and writer C.P. Snow held a legendary lecture at Cambridge University. The lecture was about modern society’s ‘two cultures’, the humanities and the natural sciences, which he contended were in critical opposition to each other. Scientists, artists, and intellectuals lacked the ability to talk across differences and thus had no deep comprehension of each other’s thinking. His hope was that the two cultures could respect each other’s values so that they could communicate effectively in speech. Such mutual understanding was needed, he argued, to solve the world’s problems.

The lecture was published later as a small book and aroused a vehement furore.¹ The use of the term “two cultures”, contrary to Snow’s hope, helped to maintain, rather than dissolve, the opposition of the two cultures. Afterwards, one cannot avoid seeing a rhetorical parallel to the confrontation of that period between the Western bloc and the Soviet bloc. However, Snow was neither the first nor the last thinker who pointed to an almost unbridgeable chasm between these two cultures. Previously a number of German thinkers had argued that the difference was not only characteristic of our time but also intractable due to a necessary contrast between the Geisteswissenschaften and the Naturwissenschaften. And subsequently a number of postmodern philosophers followed suit by casting doubt on the possibility of the so-called human sciences as a uniquely rational effort to understand human nature.

But there were also scientific movements which wanted to overcome this separation. Attempts to make the study of humans acceptable for scientific research resulted in reductive approaches such as behaviourism in the nineteen thirties, forties, and fifties. It was thought that by
reducing human actions and mental capacities to physical behaviour alone, it would be possible to apply natural scientific methods in the study of linguistics and psychology. No doubt such a reductive view was mistaken in the first place because already at that time there seemed to be no evidence that scholars in the humanities should be able to understand language, human history, art, and literature without referring to human intentionality. Structuralism, as advocated by Ferdinand Saussure and others, had developed a general theory of language based on linguistic data which had no application to actual stimuli and responses. Today behaviourism is no longer considered a viable position in linguistics, having been replaced by the cognitive sciences such as neurophysiology and neuropsychology. From this point of view some may still nourish a hope that the human sciences one day will become ‘real’ natural sciences when we can explain actions, language, and mental capacities solely in terms of brain processes or other physical states of the organism.

In my opinion the hermeneutic approach, as advocated by defenders of the distinctness of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, was correct in its basic claim that our understanding of the humanities is different from our understanding of the natural sciences so that the former is not reducible to the latter. But it failed to grasp that human behaviour, including mental processes, is a genuine part of nature, whereas the scientistic approach was right in holding that humans are not essentially different from other creatures. Therefore those methods of acquiring knowledge, which were selected as most effective in the study of biological evolution, apply to the humanities as well.

**Dualism, idealism, and neo-Kantianism**

Around the turn of the 19th century in particular Wilhelm Dilthey argued, on the basis of German idealism, for a significant contrast between the natural sciences and the humanities. He saw a significant difference between the objects in which the two cultures were interested, and he reflected upon how they should approach these objects. The humanities were the sciences of the spirit, which dealt with the human psyche in all its guises, while the natural sciences were directed against lifeless and inanimate nature. This viewpoint can be traced directly back to the French philosopher René Descartes’ dualistic understanding of the soul and the body. As is well known, Descartes made an absolute distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* while maintaining that the soul and the body form two independent substances.