

Part V

The Two Cultures

Humanist intellectuals are frequently hostile to science. This hostility encompasses not only the misuses (atom bombs) and miscarriages (global warming) of technology but also its supposedly inhuman, mechanistic approach to the natural and human world. Tallis considers such hostility, coming from individuals who are beneficiaries of science-based technology, enjoying comfort and security unprecedented in history, deeply hypocritical. Moreover, it offers no positive suggestions as to how the undoubted benefits of science-based technology may be more widely disseminated nor its adverse effects controlled. Most important of all, for Tallis, is the fact that such hostility fails to recognise the true mystery of scientific knowledge, which he regards as the most miraculous phenomenon in the universe and the most extraordinary manifestation of the capacity of human beings to transcend the here and now and make that which is around them explicit.

Tallis would contend that of almost equal concern is the failure of many humanist intellectuals to understand anything about the methods of science. They have failed to learn from disciplines in which, unlike their own, there are robust methods of acquiring reliable, universalisable knowledge, and strong institutional controls on fraud and powerful strategies for identifying and correcting error. Not only have these lessons of science been lost on some humanist intellectuals, but, he would argue, there has also been a concerted effort to suggest that scientific knowledge is subordinate to the power formations of discursive communities, or that it is equivalent to magic. In other words, scientific enquiry is presented as being as unreliable a source of knowledge as the disciplines dominated by charismatic leaders whose *obiter dicta* – often summing up the entire human universe in an aside – are accepted without being questioned (and sometimes without being understood). The fact that science has enormously enhanced our power to control nature remains unexplained by those who would sociologise its discoveries about the natural world.

Tallis believes that ignorance of science – mainly spontaneous, but sometimes wilful and cultivated – amongst humanist intellectuals has had many adverse effects. The quality of the debate about many social issues – where a certain degree of numeracy and an understanding of how causal relations may be determined are essential – dominated as it is by individuals unschooled in the methods of acquiring robust knowledge is correspondingly low. For Tallis, many humanist intellectuals not only deprive themselves of acquaintance with what he would certainly describe as humanity's greatest imaginative adventure, but also, through their disparagement of science, discourage others from exploring what he sees as undoubtedly the central cultural fact of our age. His writings are an attempt to see to it that art and science are given their due place in the discourse of intellectuals, in the hope that a new understanding, arising out of the convergence of the two, might come into being.