

The Two Cultures Debate: Historical Contexts and Future Prospects

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Objectives

1. To show that the 'division' between the arts and sciences has its origins as far back as classical Greece.
2. To use this historical background to explain why, though slow, progress is being made on repairing the relationship between the two fields.

Background

In 1959, CP Snow gave a Rede lecture entitled "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution" which quickly became a touchstone for those interested in the divisions between the arts and sciences. The idea of two intellectual "cultures" remains prevalent today and any discussions about the division between arts and sciences typically use Snow's lecture as the only historical basis. This debate, however, is much older than CP Snow and can be traced back to the beginnings of Western thought.

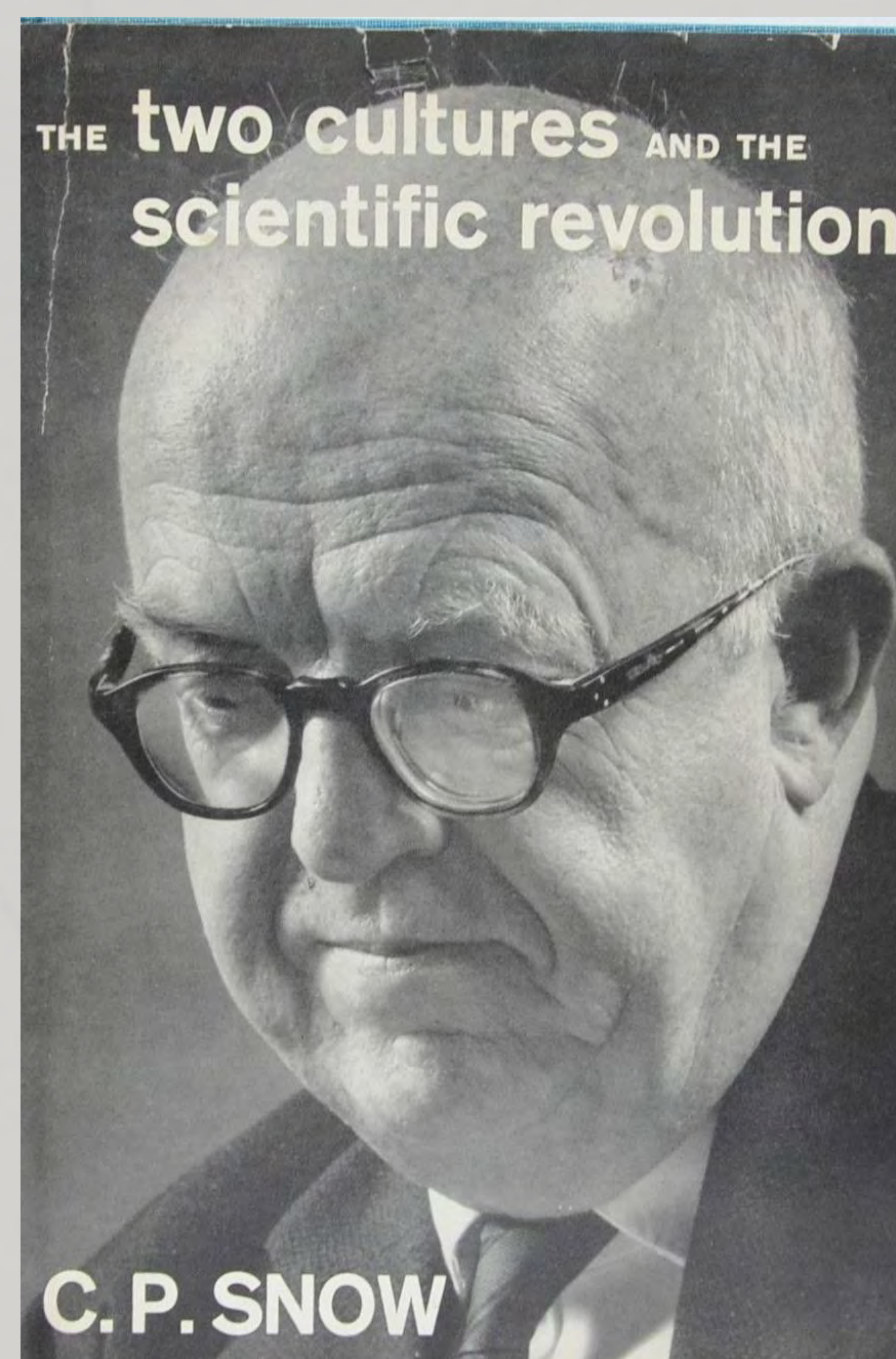


Image Source: Wikipedia

"I believe the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups."
- CP Snow, 1959

Research

A variety of classical and contemporary works were read to support the thesis.

≈ ca. 380 BC – Plato	Debates with the Sophists
1549 – Peter Ramus	<i>Arguments in Rhetoric against Quintilian</i>
1605 – Francis Bacon	<i>The Advancement of Learning</i>
1667 – Thomas Sprat	<i>The History of the Royal Society of London</i>
1690 – John Locke	<i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i>
1709 – Giambattista Vico	<i>On the Study Methods of Our Time</i>
1873 – Friedrich Nietzsche	<i>On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense</i>
1959 – CP Snow	<i>The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution</i>
1962 – Thomas Kuhn	<i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i>
1966 – Kenneth Burke	<i>Language as Symbolic Action</i>
1989 – Stanley Fish	<i>Rhetoric</i>
1998 – EO Wilson	<i>Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge</i>
2000s – Contemporary Research	Ex. NS Vaage "On Cultures and Artscience"

Discussion

Research indicates that the debate between arts and sciences existed in various forms long before CP Snow.

- In **classical Greece**, the debate began as one between Plato and the Sophists, or between rhetoric and philosophy and revolved around issues of truth and how it can be communicated.
- Many **Enlightenment** thinkers were similarly concerned with issues surrounding truth and knowledge, and the debate was established as one between early science (ie. natural philosophy) and rhetoric.
- As science took hold, **nineteen- and twentieth century** thinkers like Thomas Kuhn and Kenneth Burke argued that since all knowledge is communicated through language, science and arts are necessarily more intertwined than some scientists may like to believe.
- These fundamental questions about truth and knowledge **continue** to be asked and they are now generally framed in terms of the "two cultures" debate.

Conclusion

Although the divisions between the arts and sciences existed centuries ago and still persist today, there is hope that these divisions may be diminishing. For example, greater emphasis is being placed on interdisciplinary research at many educational institutions and the emergence of STEAM and artscience education may be an important step forward. Also, the increased focus on non-Western intellectual history, such as on Indigenous ways of knowing, may offer helpful insights into how knowledge and learning of various kinds can be brought into real, lasting dialogue.