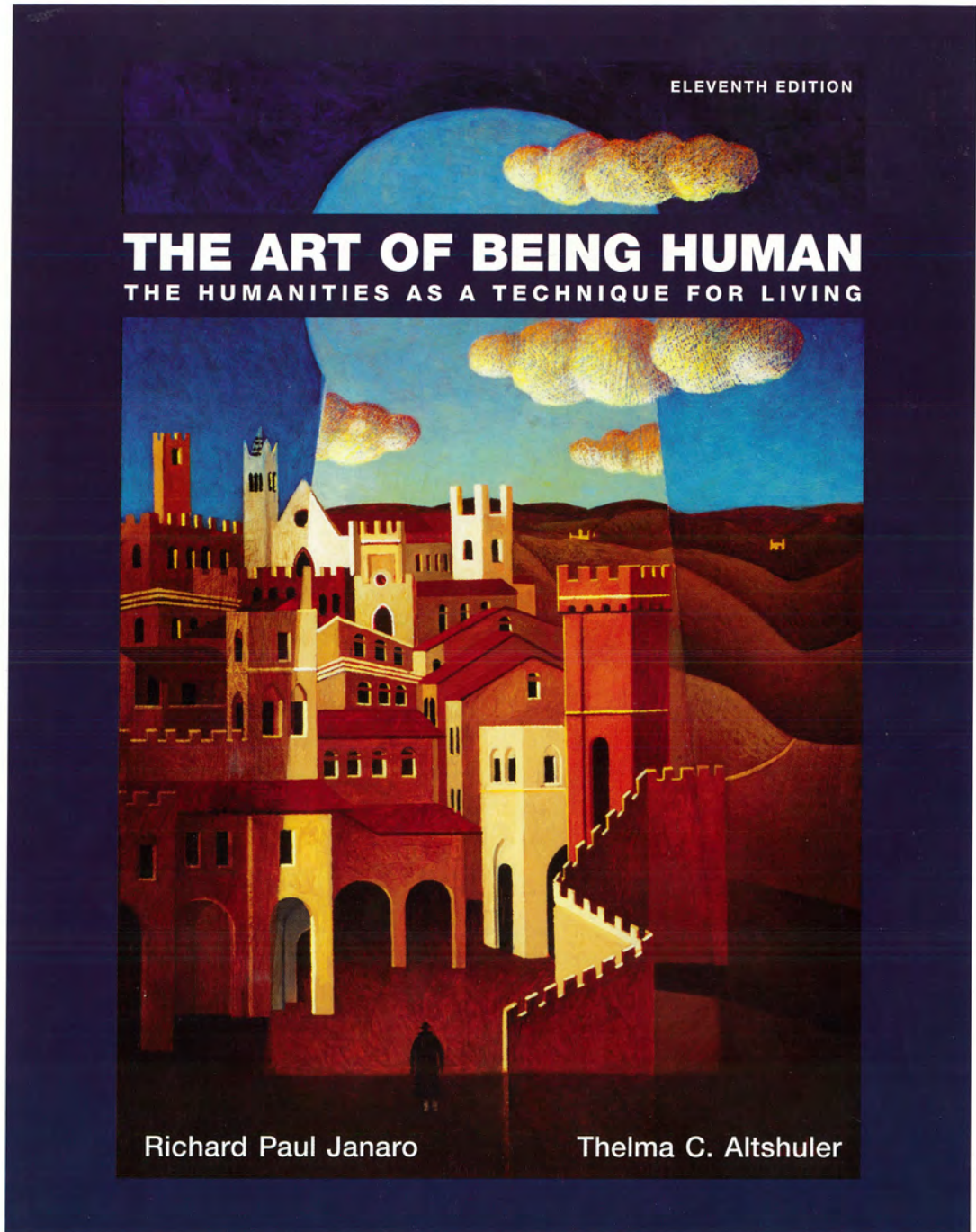


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ALWAYS LEARNING

# The Art of Being Human

The Humanities as a Technique  
for Living

ELEVENTH EDITION

**Richard Paul Janaro**

*New World School of the Arts*

**Thelma C. Altshuler**

*Professor Emerita, Miami-Dade College*

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*This book is dedicated to Dr. Milton E. Ford, in memoriam, 1941–2014*



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# Preface

The eleventh edition of *The Art of Being Human*, like its predecessors, introduces students to the joys of the humanities—those disciplines that reflect the best efforts of human culture through the ages and around the globe. As always, our aim is to communicate our enthusiasm for the humanities both as the source of experience for the mind and the emotions, and as a path to self-knowledge. By becoming acquainted with the creative arts and learning to think critically about them, students will inevitably better understand themselves and the world they live in.

*The Art of Being Human* tells the story of outstanding achievements in the humanities throughout history and across the world's many cultures. We acknowledge the contributions of the past because people very much like us lived there, and those people created remarkable works that continue to move us today. What they said and did can shed light on the present. And we explore the works of modern and contemporary artists, knowing only that some of these will become, like their predecessors, classics and even masterpieces. Whenever we revisit this text, we find new reasons to rejoice and new stimuli for the senses in work from both past and present, and from cultures and peoples around the world.

## How This Book Is Organized

*The Art of Being Human* is unique among introductory texts in the humanities because of our focus both on the humanistic arts—literature, music, art, performance—and on persistent philosophical themes including religion, morality, happiness, and freedom. Unlike the typical chronologically organized text, *The Art of Being Human* allows us to explore themes and disciplines individually and also to draw significant connections among them.

Chapters 1 to 3 offer a basic foundation for the study of the humanities. We define what we mean by “the humanities” in Chapter 1; in Chapter 2, we emphasize the importance of critical thinking in understanding the disciplines and themes that are presented and discussed in the text; and in Chapter 3, we describe the role of myth as it underlies our study of the humanities.

Chapters 4 to 9 provide accessible, comprehensive explorations of the basic disciplines of the humanities: literature, art, music, theater, musical theater and dance, and film and television.

Chapters 10 to 16, which set this text apart from other introductory humanities texts, offer wide-ranging discussions of themes that have proved central to cultures around the world. These themes—including religion, morality,

happiness, love, freedom, the role of nature, and the challenge of death and life-affirmation—introduce the philosophical questions that have confronted humankind throughout its existence, and the ways in which they have impacted and been reflected in the arts.


## What's New in This Edition

For this new edition, we've created an extraordinary new learning architecture: REVEL. Every feature that students formerly may have accessed through MyHumanitiesKit or MyArtsLab is now embedded in this new cross-platform environment—music, architectural panoramas, Closer Looks, studio technique videos, self-tests, and so on. You can zoom in on a piece of art, switch on the chapter audio, and listen to the text being read to you while you look at the image. You can begin your day at home, working with a chapter on your laptop, get on the bus, continue working on your smart phone, arrive at school, and open the chapter on your tablet. REVEL is as fully mobile as you are, and you can use it on any device, anywhere and anytime.

We firmly believe that this new learning architecture will help your students engage even more meaningfully in the critical thinking process, helping them to understand how cultures influence one another, how ideas are exchanged and evolve over time, and how this process has led us to where we are today. Perhaps most important, the connections drawn in this text (and emphasized in the REVEL architecture) allow students to better understand themselves.

*The Art of Being Human* has remained popular through ten editions because the humanities are alive and will be alive forever—and as a part of our daily lives, they constantly grow and change. Thus, the present text includes a number of important revisions necessary to keep our special approach to the humanities vital. Indeed, there is very little throughout the eleventh edition that has not been reexamined, revised, or rewritten. In particular, we have focused on bringing the book clearly into the twenty-first century with new material in virtually every chapter about contemporary works and contemporary thought. In addition to the new REVEL platform, you will find the following changes:

- **Major additions to every chapter on the disciplines of the humanities** are designed to introduce students to contemporary figures and works. These additions include:
  - New sections on **poetry in our time** and the **post-modern novel** (Ch. 4)

- New sections on **abstract expressionism, performance and installation art, and digital art** (Ch. 5)
- Expanded discussions of **rock, hip-hop, and rap** (Ch. 6)
- New discussions of contemporary playwrights including **David Mamet, August Wilson, and Tony Kushner** (Ch. 7)
- New sections on **rock and jukebox musicals, and the Broadway “spectacular”** (Ch. 8)
- New sections on **science fiction, animated film, and the “comic book” blockbuster** (Ch. 9)
- A completely new section on **television, focusing on the “new golden age” of television drama** (Ch. 9)
- **An expanded emphasis on critical thinking** is reflected in:
  - **New image captions** that invite students to form their own opinions about what they are seeing
  - **A Critical Focus**, a feature at the end of each discipline chapter (Chs. 4–9), that offers a lens through which students may look closely at a single work, or compare two or more works within a genre, and invites them to use their critical skills to respond to questions about these works—to analyze and compare, for example, poems about dying young by Walt Whitman, Wilfred Owen, and A.E. Housman, or to discuss the appeal of “bad” characters like Tony Soprano and Omar Little of *The Wire*
- **Revisions and updates to the thematic chapters** (Chs. 10–16) reflect both contemporary thought and a more wide-ranging focus on global cultures.
- **Learning Objectives** aligned with major heads throughout each chapter, and **Looking Back** sections at the end of each chapter, guide students to focus on the important overall concepts introduced in each chapter.
- **Musical selections** that are being made available for listening via the REVEL are indicated by an  icon in the printed text.

## Enduring Strengths in *The Art of Being Human*

No book enters an eleventh edition unless it is built on a sound foundation. The eleventh edition of *The Art of Being Human* continues to reflect our belief that a non-chronological structure can lead to a deeper understanding of the humanities disciplines. We retain here our focus on the individual artistic disciplines and on philosophical themes that have been central to the study of the humanities through the years. This new edition builds on the many strengths that have made this text highly respected and easy to use. These strengths include:

- *Full coverage of the humanities.* *The Art of Being Human* discusses all the important disciplines and examines

connections to issues that remain of vital importance. Students are encouraged to explore how the arts and social themes relate to their own lives.

- *Individual treatment of disciplines and themes.* The book’s topical organization allows students to explore one artistic mode or theme at a time, rather than having to cover multiple disciplines and themes in each chapter, often the case in chronologically organized texts.
- *Flexible organization.* Each chapter stands on its own, so the book can be taught in any sequence and can be easily customized to meet the goals of any number of introductory courses on the humanities in two- and four-year colleges.
- *Diverse range of traditional and contemporary examples of all the arts.* *The Art of Being Human* strives to familiarize students with the reach of the humanities by including many examples of literature and art from cultures around the globe. We address issues that remain of vital importance for an increasingly global society.
- *Accessible writing style.* We strive to explore the world of the humanities in a contemporary idiom that students can easily understand.
- *An impressive visual program.* The more than 250 color images provide students with a rich visual appreciation of the arts. All of the images and their captions are tied directly to discussions within the text.

Our hope is that students who read this book will discover much about themselves, in addition to gaining an understanding of human culture that will prove rewarding in their ongoing development. If, as Katherine Mansfield once said, a great poet must first be a great poem, what shall we say of the fully realized human being? Won’t such an individual be not only a poem but also a song, dance, painting, play, movie, or new idea? These are distant stars at which to aim, but a journey too easily accomplished may not be worth the effort.

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To write a humanities text is perhaps the best way to discover the humane characteristics of others and the secret of all meaningful endeavor, which is that *no one can work alone*.

*Richard Paul Janaro*

*Thelma C. Altshuler*



# The Art of Being Human





## PART I

# Exploring the Humanities

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## Chapter 1

The Humanities: A Shining Beacon

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## Chapter 2

The Humanities and Critical Thinking

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## Chapter 3

Myth and the Origin of the Humanities

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# Chapter 1

# The Humanities: A Shining Beacon



## Learning Objectives

- 1.1** Define “the humanities.”
- 1.2** Summarize the gifts of the humanities.
- 1.3** Explain why Leonardo da Vinci is considered the perfect model of the “infinite” person.



**Figure 1.1** Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503–1507.  
Why has this tiny work become the most famous painting in the world? What magic does it have?  
GL Archive/Alamy

Defining the humanities is no longer as simple as it once was. At one time, the word “**humanities**,” which grew out of the term “**humanism**,” simply meant the study of what the best minds of classical Greece and Rome—the great artists, writers, and philosophers—had accomplished. During the Renaissance, the huge artistic and political revolution that swept over Western Europe beginning in the fourteenth century, interest revived in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome—cultures that had been left largely unexamined during the thousand-year span following the fall of Rome. The intelligentsia of the Renaissance believed that only through a study of classical art, literature, and philosophy could a person become *fully* human.

These **disciplines** became known as *the humanities*. In time, the term grew beyond the study of Greek and Roman cultures to include those of major Western European countries: first Italy, then France and Spain, then Britain and, finally, Germany. As cultures multiplied, so did the disciplines people needed to study in pursuit of humanness. Music, theater, and dance began to flourish during the Renaissance, and scholars discovered that these disciplines were also part of the ancient world’s legacy.

More recently, this ethnocentric view of the humanities—the study of Western cultures—has expanded again to acknowledge the vast contributions of cultures beyond Europe. The art, music, theater, and literature of China, Japan, and other Asian nations, as well as those of Africa and the Americas, have become important additions to the study of the humanities.

## Being Fully Human

### 1.1 What are the humanities?

In this book, we define the term *humanities* as broadly as possible. Yes, we still need to pay attention to extraordinary artistic and intellectual achievements that have been singled out for special praise and that now represent what is sometimes called the “humanistic tradition.” All of us belong to the human race and should want to know as much as possible about the distinguished contributions of those who have gone before. We may also find in our study of the humanities our response to the traditional mandate: Know thyself. By exploring the contributions of others, we begin to see how we ourselves might contribute—not, perhaps, as great artists or writers or musicians, but as more thoughtful and critical human beings.

We do need to recognize that the “humanistic tradition” was for many centuries limited more or less to the contributions made by *men* of the classical and then the Western European worlds. Plato and Michelangelo and Shakespeare continue to deserve our admiration and reward our study. But our study should and does include those persons, both male and female, past and present, from around the globe, who may be little known or not known at all, who nevertheless left behind or who now offer a myriad of wonderful songs, poems, and provocative thoughts waiting to be appreciated.

The humanities are also the creative and intellectual expressions of each of us in moments of inspiration, whether they happen in the shower or just walking down the street on a balmy day when our spirits are lifted by the sheer joy of being alive. In these times of global fears and a future of uncertainty, in these times of dizzying technological advances that can be both marvelous and bewildering, when it can be hard to pinpoint our identity in time and space, the humanities offer a safe haven, a quiet harbor where we can moor our vessels and, at least for a time, confirm who we are.

Each of us is more than a gender, an age, an address, an occupation. Each of us embodies thoughts, expressed or not, the capacity to be moved, the need to laugh or cry, longings for things just beyond our reach. The humanities give us stories to inspire our imagination, ideas to stimulate our intellect, musical sounds to excite our passions, and the knowledge that we can respond to the creativity and thoughts of others.

Studying the humanities allows us to look inward to see what *we* think and what creative impulses lie dormant and cry out to be released. A greater knowledge of the humanities helps us confront our true identity. A major aim of this book is to show how a study of the humanities can be the starting point for the journey into self-knowledge.

## Studying the Humanities: The Importance of Critical Thinking

The humanities comprise not only the inspiring achievements themselves, but also the *study* of those achievements, as well as the critical process by which scholars and critics analyze and interpret them and then communicate their findings to others so that the works they study will never be forgotten. And the humanities are the critical process by which we ourselves look squarely at and come to appreciate what is there for us to read, see, or hear. This process, often called *critical thinking*, is essential to being effectively human, especially as the world's tempo increases. In fact, so crucial is critical thought, and so important are the humanities in developing it, that the following chapter is devoted solely to the subject.

The humanities offer a technique for living accessible to every human being who wants to do more with life. They offer a way of life filled with moments of critical thought and aesthetic pleasure, and they are urgently needed in our world.

The humanities are addictive. Once you let song and story, music and dance, and words and ideas into your life, you can never live without them. And you should never *have* to. The humanities may best be appreciated in our quiet moments, and quiet can also be addictive in a noisy world. *If only everyone on earth would insist on these quiet moments, wouldn't the world be a happier (and a safer) place?*

In a world that has become a global village, in a world with all its hovering threats of terror attacks and dirty bombs, with so many who are more than willing to sacrifice their own lives to kill others, in a world of environmental woes, a world in which cynics wonder about the value of living—in such a world there are always the humanities to lift our spirits. Art and music and literature, stories and songs, all the marvels of the human mind, the architectural and engineering achievements, or just noticing the first spring flower keep reminding us of what it means to be truly human.

Humankind will not necessarily prevail just because we are living longer. Genetic scientists envision replacing the gene responsible for aging; eventually, they promise life expectancies that were once found only in literary fables. (Perhaps some of us may live to celebrate our “eleventy-first birthday,” like Bilbo Baggins of *The Hobbit*.) Existing on and on without coming to terms with who we are and without knowing how to reach a safe haven inside when the world gets maddeningly chaotic about us might not be the best technique for living. The humanities help make longer life spans abundantly richer.

## Redefining the Humanities in a Wider World

The key to the richer life is to be as open-minded as possible. One of the dangers of living longer is becoming too firmly enclosed by the values many of us have held since our earliest days. The humanities cannot fail to inspire open-mindedness. Exploring the literature, music, art, and patterns of thought of other cultures is indispensable to our own development. Why? The answer is simple: The world has grown too small for us not to care what is happening all around us; and the world *is* just that—all around us. So we need to balance a sharper awareness of who we are with a broader understanding of who *they* are; for they are part of us, and we of them.

The cultural history of Western civilization, as traditionally presented, simply will no longer suffice. During the time of the ancient Greeks, for example, were there not many women who thought great thoughts and secretly wrote great poems?

While the much heralded early civilizations, like those of Egypt, China, Japan, Rome, and Greece, have received abundant attention and been the subject of countless critical and historical studies, they do not tell the whole story of human genius. Rich cultures flourished in Africa; in South and Central America; in the North America that was inhabited long before Columbus “discovered” it; in the lands that produced Islamic art, science, and philosophy, lands once thought too mysterious for the Western mind to understand; in lands of the unknown people who built Stonehenge in England and the 30-foot statues that stand at eternal attention on Easter Island. While owners were sipping juleps on plantation verandas, slaves in their humble shanties were weaving elaborate tales and singing complex songs to keep their heritage alive.

The primary mission of this book is, therefore, to show you that a wonderful, a magical world of human devising has existed for as long as humanity has existed and that it is still there, waiting each day to be discovered anew. It is the world of the humanities. The humanities are here. They are just outside your door, waiting. They are even inside *you* if you know where to look. All you have to do is open that door or get in touch with your creative self and extend a welcoming hand. If you do, your life will be changed very much for the better. And you will want to run out into the street and share the wonder with everyone you meet!

## Gifts of the Humanities

### 1.2 What are the gifts of the humanities?

Economics tells us that the wants of people are insatiable, but resources are limited. Because almost everything is scarcer than we would like, treasured possessions, as well as basics such as food and shelter, come with a price tag. Even water is becoming scarce; it may not be long before we have to pay premium prices just to slake our thirst, let alone water our lawns. Do we have enough money to buy everything we want? The answer is usually NO!

With the humanities the problem is reversed. *The resources of the humanities are unlimited*, but all too often our wants are meager. In the economic world, we can't always be rich by choice, but in the world of the humanities, we can be “poor” by choice.

Several decades ago, during a severe recession, banks attracted savings deposits by offering gifts to those who would forego spending and open CD accounts instead. People walked out with new toasters, blenders, steam irons, and luggage; and, of course, bank reserves swelled. Such incentives are cyclical in nature, but the humanities always have gifts that are there for us regardless of what the economy is doing. Here are some of them.

### Beauty

Ever since philosophy began, ever since thoughtful people started asking what makes life good, the answer often involved something called **beauty**. Its close connection with pleasure has always seemed apparent. It is pleasant and desirable to see beautiful things and beautiful people. People prefer to live amid beauty than amid ugliness.

Though people may debate whether a particular person or piece of music is beautiful, there is widespread agreement that something deserves to be called beautiful if the arrangement of the parts is pleasing, if it seems *right*. The rightness of the arrangement determines the pleasure that it gives us. When there is something in an arrangement that seems *not* right, we are less attracted, possibly even repelled. What are the criteria for something seeming *right*? That is, admittedly, the tricky part.

Is judging an arrangement—of a painting, a person's face, a story, a dramatic moment—as right or not right entirely subjective? Yes and no. Culture can play a

role—some cultures perceive symmetry as right, some prefer asymmetry; some find delicacy important, others prefer strength. To some extent, we must rely for our standards on those works that have, over centuries, retained the capability to move us.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (Figure 1.1) is probably the world's most famous painting. Each week thousands flock to the Louvre Museum in Paris to see the portrait of the lady with the enigmatic smile. Since its creation in the years between 1503 and 1507 innumerable art historians and critics have given their opinions of what makes this a great work. They may differ in the specific elements they praise; some appreciate the haunting face or the ambiguity of the gaze, others the mysteriousness of the landscape behind the face. Not everyone will agree that the subject herself is a beautiful woman—that judgment may be colored by cultural standards—but they tend to agree that *Mona Lisa* is a beautiful work of art.

**AESTHETIC PLEASURE** The pleasure that beauty inspires in us is called **aesthetic**. Yet what kind of pleasure is it? One answer is that the beautiful inspires within us *a feeling of well-being that is its own justification*. True, the attraction of a shiny new car may have less to do with its pure beauty than with the pride we feel in owning it, or if it belongs to someone else, by the envy we feel. When a beautiful face passes by, we might long for closer contact with it, but we would not have such a desire if we did not first make an aesthetic judgment. The critics who have written volumes about the “secret” of the *Mona Lisa* have already made an aesthetic judgment and are now trying to find the words to describe why the arrangement of the parts is right. A universal definition of beauty that fits every example may be impossible to find, but suffice it to say that few of us would deny that the beautiful does indeed exist.

The humanities are, in part, a catalog of works that have tallied a host of positive votes from people who have spent their lives in pursuit of the beautiful and who hold up road signs for us in our own quest. Be advised, however, that the pursuit is endless, and the catalog needs almost daily updating. The road signs often vary from one culture to another. If we are to expand our capacity for aesthetic pleasure, we need to experience many versions of the beautiful and try to see them from other points of view.

In the Asian wing of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, tucked away in a corner that the visitor can easily miss, is a sculpture called *Water Stone* (Figure 1.2) by the Japanese artist Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988). It is a gray stone fountain of uneven shape with a perpetual flow of water that, at first glance, appears to be a sheet of clear glass sitting motionless on top but, in reality, trickles slowly down the side so that the escaping water is always equal to the new supply being pumped up from below. The trickle creates a soft sound that soothes and mesmerizes the visitor who takes the time to sit on the bench provided. One woman reported that she sat there entranced for nearly an hour.

The arrangement of parts in *Water Stone* includes the shape and texture of the stone, the varying shades created by the falling water, and, most important, the sound. But you don't have to be in a museum to experience the beauty of similar arrangements. A woodland stream, flowing over rocks of different shapes, will create varied shadings, and if you shut your eyes and really listen to the water, you will discover that it has a variety of sounds, depending on wind and the different rocks over which it flows. In truth, all you need to



**Figure 1.2** Isamu Noguchi, *Water Stone*, c. 1987.

Would your experience be different if you found a similar group of stones in a natural setting? What differentiates the beauty of art from the beauty of nature?

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

do to experience in full how the humanities can take you to that quiet oasis we mentioned is find a stream in the woods, or study closely the different colors in rainwater gushing alongside a curb. When you search for the beautiful, you will be astonished to realize how close it is.

Of course, the arts can do more for us than provide an aesthetic moment. Sometimes they may convey a message the artist believes is important. In fact, some take the position that meaning is what we primarily look for in any work. Yet it does a disservice both to the artist and to the viewers if we always insist upon looking for a message. (After all, what is the message in water slowly trickling down the side of a stone sculpture?) Many artists, as well as poets and novelists, object to those critics who analyze their work, evaluating it solely in terms of the important—or unimportant—meanings they find.

The humanities can be enjoyed for both their aesthetic and communicative functions. Learning to distinguish one from the other is an important part of *critical thinking*, the subject of the chapter that follows.

## Beautiful Movement

The perfection of movement cannot fail to inspire a sense of awe and admiration. Movement is as much a part of being human as breathing. Few of us move in perfect synchrony, but almost all of us experience joy when we see it done right. Even though our own movements may lack the coordination of, say, the skilled dancer, there is also aesthetic pleasure for us not just in watching others, but in getting up and swaying, gliding, or shaking to a rhythm. We have patterned our lives to meeting deadlines and reaching destinations. Perhaps that's why people like, for a change, to be on the dance floor and simply move in rhythm. Are they trying to get somewhere in particular? No. The pleasure of the movement is its own reason for existing.

The French artist Edgar Degas (1834–1917) loved to paint dancers (see Figure 1.3). Degas's many paintings of ballerinas depict the beauty of women and the elegance of their movements. Portraying beauty and elegance may not have been his only intent; other paintings depict working women in other circumstances, and he may have been intrigued by the role of women in the working world. But clearly ballerinas gave him aesthetic pleasure. His paintings give that same pleasure to us.



**Figure 1.3** Edgar Degas, *The Dance Class*, c. 1874.

Can a painting provide us with the same experience we have watching actual dancers? How might these experiences differ?

Scala / Art Resource, NY



So do the serene gliding, graceful leaps of a figure skater, the seemingly impossible spins of a snow boarder or X Games athlete, the angular pops of hip hop dancers, and the fluid grace of champion runners. The arrangement of the parts in a given movement seems right, even if we don't see their function. Many of us are not as coordinated or as strong and well-trained as a great dancer, skater, or runner. If we were, then their art might seem less beautiful.

## Language

Words in varied combinations are the means by which we communicate to ourselves and with each other. Through language, we make ourselves understood to others, and we are able to understand what we read and what others are saying. The need for language becomes apparent at an early age; we develop a love of language if we are fortunate enough to be around adults who talk to us (but not in baby talk), who enjoy reading, and who read to us.

Children develop through recognizable and documented stages. Most children between the ages of 2 and 3 become word-conscious. The need to attach a name to everything in sight appears to be an inborn instinct. Parents as well as older siblings can be annoyed at hearing the persistent "What's that?" throughout the day, even as they are happy that the insatiable demand for words is proceeding as it should. At this stage, children like to repeat sentences and phrases they hear in their surroundings, unconcerned that they have no idea what these words mean. Children like the sound and the "taste" of words. Unfortunately, the insatiable need to add to and replenish our vocabulary does not always stay with us.

**ACQUIRING MODELS** How or when some of us lose the need for more words is a complex mystery. Unraveling it is perhaps less important than the awareness that *it does not have to happen*. That's where the humanities come in. Through reading, through listening to great language on the stage or screen—or, better yet, through reading poetry aloud—we acquire models of how to say things in ways that make others sit up and take notice. People experienced in using the humanities as a technique for living sometimes make a point by directly quoting well-known lines, assured that their friends will catch the reference.

One of the most famous lines in all of drama is the beginning of Hamlet's third soliloquy: *To be or not to be: that is the question*. When people on similar wavelengths are discussing whether, for example, to stay home and watch television or go downtown for a costly evening of eating out and seeing a movie, the comment "Ah, that is the question" communicates instantly that the speaker is not leaning one way or the other but is wide open to suggestions. Directly quoting or providing variations on famous lines that you know others will recognize is not only fun but cuts down on the need for details and circular discussions.

The most popular work of the medieval English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343–1400), *The Canterbury Tales*, contains a collection of unforgettable stories as well as famous descriptions of the people who tell them. Chaucer was a master at capturing the essence of his characters with swift strokes of his pen, and many of his descriptions are part of the reservoir of language in the minds of people who read. One of the characters is a lawyer who is always in a hurry and apparently so busy that he could easily have been the envy of lazy people. After describing the man and his behavior in detail, Chaucer adds: "Yet he seemed busier than he was." Who knows how many thousands of readers over the last 600 years have used some version of this line in referring to people who display the same kind of feverish but essentially meaningless activity? A high school student, asked why he is not doing his homework, responds: "I'm very busy with other things." We roll our eyes and say, "He seems busier than he is."

The sixth-century BCE Greek philosopher Heraclitus is famous for having said: “You cannot step twice into the same river.” By this he meant that life is constant change, that the only thing stable in all the universe is the fact of change itself. A number of more recent writers have amended his aphorism to say that we can’t even step *once* into the same river, because water flows without cease—or, more ironically from environmentalists, because the water has disappeared altogether, as is true for some parts of the Colorado River. Clearly, the versatile language derived from the humanities even increases the chance that an urgent cause may win more supporters.

**APPRECIATING VARIETY** The humanities help us to appreciate a variety of ingenious phrasings and offer us models of how language can be expertly manipulated. One of the greatest comedies ever written, Oscar Wilde’s 1895 *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is a storehouse of witty lines illustrating that one way of saying something is not necessarily as good as another. In one scene, the hero, Jack Worthing, is being interviewed by his fiancée’s mother, a social lioness with biting wit, who investigates his credentials as a suitor (see Figure 1.4). She asks the nervous young man whether he smokes. Sheepishly he admits that, well yes, he does smoke. Her unexpected reply: “I’m glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some sort.” Not only is the lady staying one step ahead of him with her wit, but she is making an indirect statement about the indolence and lack of purpose of the upper classes.

Another master of language was the thirteenth-century Persian poet known as Rumi, who left us a treasure trove of clever and moving sentiments. One memorable line, often rendered as “The wound is the place the Light enters you,” may have influenced the twentieth-century Canadian poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen, whose “Anthem” includes the line, “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”<sup>1</sup>

Playing with language has evolved into a high art. Like the beautiful, good language needs no further justification. A person characterized by others as someone with “a way with words” or “a flair for language” generally earns respect (unless, of course, it turns out that the person never has anything else to offer *except* words).

Yet just as a novel or play or movie can be spoiled when authors use words and idioms that have become so commonplace they are no longer effective, so too is the everyday language of most people littered with terminology employed over and over. Yet such hackneyed language keeps slipping from our tongues without our even noticing. We insert “like” into our speech so frequently that we hardly notice it’s there.

**EVERYDAY SPEECH** In addition to the omnipresence of the word “like,” ordinary speech is now sprinkled frequently with “y’know” or “know what I’m sayin’,” and we often use “go” instead of “said”: “I go . . . and then he goes . . .”. In addition, we are encouraged to use abbreviations (BTW for “by the way,” LOL for “laugh out loud,” and so on), or to replace language altogether with emoticons, as we communicate more and more often by text message rather than in face-to-face dialog. Language is always changing, and perhaps now it is changing faster than ever before. Consider these sentences: “I need a new iPhone because the apps I have just aren’t working,” or “We stayed up all night binge-watching *Orange Is the New Black*.” Apps? Binge-watching? Ten years ago, words and phrases like these didn’t exist.

But do we pay attention to the words that we hear? Do they startle us with their cleverness? Do we remember a memorable turn of phrase? Does language help us grow? Listen carefully to the speech patterns of



**Figure 1.4** Brian Bedford as Lady Bracknell in a 2009 production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Roundabout Theater in New York.

Oscar Wilde’s plays are famous for their use of wit and wordplay. Has the emergence of social media changed the way we use language? How?

Joan Marcus Photography

people with whom you are conversing. If their language tends to be fresh and interesting, chances are they spend a lot of time reading. Perhaps your own language reflects the same habit. We hope so.

Here is an excerpt from a poem by Taylor Mali, who has had a varied kind of life, having taught for nine years, studied acting with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and then become a poet and advocate of teaching literacy in the classroom. The poem is titled “Totally like whatever, you know?”

*In case you hadn't noticed,  
it has somehow become uncool  
to sound like you know what you're talking about?  
Or believe strongly in what you're saying?  
Invisible question marks and parentheses (you know?)'s  
have been attaching themselves to the ends of our sentences?  
Even when those sentences aren't, like, questions? You know?²*

## Ideas

Language is not only the vehicle through which we can display our savvy in everyday dealings with others; it is also the means by which we formulate ideas. Still, all of us have flashes of ideas that we can't quite catch hold of because the words aren't there. A statement attributed to Albert Einstein (perhaps incorrectly) suggests that “If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.” When someone explains a complicated idea such as the theory of relativity and we nod to signify understanding, we are more or less guaranteeing that we would be able to deliver the identical explanation in our own words. Very often we cannot.

Words are the means by which we think. If we have no words, we cannot have ideas. We *can* have intuitions without words, but they are not the same as ideas. Intuitions are, of course, vital human resources. We don't need words to find a piece of music exciting. Intuitions are necessary for a full appreciation of much that the humanities have to offer. But through our philosophers, novelists, and poets, we derive a love for exciting ideas. After reading a stimulating passage that makes an explosive point, one often says to oneself, “Oh! I wish I'd thought of that!” (And don't we all glow with pride when we advance an idea that meets with approval, even admiration, an idea others wish *they* had thought of?)

Thinking helps us keep our sanity—even in our world of rapidly accelerating change and technological marvels that are said to think *for* us. Fortunately, the brain can still be what makes us want to do more than just survive. Thinking keeps us in touch with ourselves and the world around us. Thinking comes in a variety of forms. Rigorous studies such as mathematics, physics, and economics provide powerful exercise for the brain, but not all of us are adept at these disciplines.

Yet happily, we have the humanities, which widen both our emotional range and our understanding of many things: the past, the present, human behavior, the workings of the creative mind, and the many unanswered questions that philosophers, scientists, and theologians have asked for centuries.

**TEACHING BY ASKING: THE SOCRATIC METHOD** The Society for Philosophical Inquiry movement is the brainchild of Christopher Phillips, author of *Socrates Café* (2001), which describes various venues, all with that name, in which society members gather to discuss and share ideas. The format for the meetings is inspired by the teaching methods of Socrates (469–399 BCE), mentor of Plato (427–347 BCE).

Socrates and his young students would gather in an Athenian grove and discuss specific questions, such as “What is justice?” As recorded by Plato—since the master himself, as far as we know, wrote nothing down—the discussions took this form:

The question is posed by Socrates.

- ONE STUDENT SAYS:** *"Justice is whatever is in the best interest of the ruling party."*
- SOCRATES ANSWERS:** *"Can the ruling party ever pass a law that is for some reason not in its best interest?"*
- STUDENT:** *"I suppose it could happen."*
- SOCRATES:** *"If it did happen, would the people be justified in breaking that law?"*
- STUDENT:** *"I don't think so. A law is a law."*
- SOCRATES:** *"In other words, it would be wrong to break a law just because somebody thought it was not in the best interest of the ruling party."*
- STUDENT:** *"Well . . . maybe it could be broken."*
- SOCRATES:** *"If you thought the law could be broken and I said it couldn't, which of us is right?"*
- STUDENT:** *"I guess in that case we're both right."*
- SOCRATES:** *"Is this your idea of a just society—one in which anyone can decide whether to obey a law or not? Would you want to live in such a society?"*
- STUDENT:** *"I . . . suppose I wouldn't."*
- SOCRATES:** *"Then justice really has to be defined as something that is absolute and not only in the best interest of the ruling party or the individual who decides not to obey a certain law."*

Socrates here demonstrates the Socratic method—that is, teaching by asking questions that stimulate critical thinking, rather than lecturing. The point of a discussion at a Socrates Café is not to solve all the problems of the world. It is to apply the technique of the ancient philosopher and the techniques of other thinkers to puzzling questions of the past and present. Clearly “justice” is one such issue. It has never been defined to everyone’s satisfaction. Whether one agrees or not that justice is absolute and unchanging or that there is no applicable principle other than “might makes right,” the discussion and defense of ideas are ways of strengthening our mental faculties. Like dancing, thinking needs no further justification.

## A Deeper Sense of the Past

The humanities allow us to see more than our personal past. Through the humanities we may immerse ourselves in the firsthand experiences of those who actually lived and often struggled in the past—lived and struggled with many of the problems that face us today. These experiences help each of us to better understand what living is all about. *The realized human being is an accumulation of what has gone before and how that affects the present.*

Through the humanities, we can live more than once: here and now, and yesterday as well. Those who refuse to browse among the cumulative treasures of human expression have only themselves to blame if they find themselves trapped in one solitary existence.

Like all of us, the past has its right to be heard. It did not, we know, allow for the *full* representation of its genius, for the contributions of both men and women from a variety of cultures. Still, the past has its own glory, even as it stands. The statue of Venus de Milo has been around for many hundreds of years. It no longer has arms, but, gazing at it, we cannot help seeing the idealism, the adoration of the female form that must have motivated the unknown classical artist. Becoming familiar with treasures of the past brings us closer to those who came before us, inspires in us the pride of belonging to the continuity of our species. The love of beauty is timeless and universal, and the past, as reflected in the humanities, has more than its share of beauty, not to mention ideas and great language.

Some treasures from the past embody issues that still face us. *The Oresteia*, an epic tragedy consisting of three plays by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus (525–456 BCE), is based on a very ancient myth about the murder of a mother and her lover by a son seeking revenge for his father’s death at their hands. In the final play, *The Eumenides*, Aeschylus creates the world’s first courtroom drama, in which the hero is acquitted on the grounds that his mother’s crime had been greater than his. She had killed a man who was also a great warrior and leader of his people. The son, Orestes, has killed an adulterous woman and her lover.

The decision to acquit the hero was made nearly 2,500 years ago and delivered from the stage at the Theater of Dionysus; the verdict is still discussed today. Theater history teachers often point out that while the acquittal does not sit well with everyone, especially feminists (who argue that it discriminates against the gender of the victim and ignores the fact that the murdered husband had a mistress), the work is nonetheless a milestone in the early history of democracy. There was, after all, a trial. Reading or watching performances of *The Oresteia* can generate discussion about whether the law, even in a democracy, judges all persons equally.

Even more modern works can give us all a deeper sense of history, of how those who lived before us thought and felt. Consider, for example, the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which almost every American schoolchild reads at some point. Doesn’t this story help many of us better understand not only the persistent issues of racism and injustice in this country, but also the emotions and sensibilities of childhood itself? Don’t countless readers recognize something of themselves in the young protagonist Scout? And certainly a painting like Picasso’s *Guernica* (see Figure 5.33) can help us know the chaos and calamity of war.

Developing a profound respect for the classical works of Socrates, Aeschylus, or the sculptor of the Venus de Milo, or for the works of more recent artists such as Harper Lee and Picasso, does not mean choosing to ignore the achievements of everyone else. At the same time, having profound respect for today and a wider vision of tomorrow does not mean that we ought to ignore what can be justly celebrated from yesterday.

## Becoming an “Infinite” Person

### 1.3 Why is Leonardo da Vinci considered the perfect model of the “infinite” person?

By sharpening our awareness of the present—the issues, the important themes and varied ways of presenting them—and by linking us to the past, the humanities provide a wider view of life. As this book unfolds, you will be learning much more about the humanities and what the various disciplines are and how they can deeply affect your life. Your view of the humanities and the world will continue to expand, and you will be on your way to becoming an infinite person.

Let us consider the very model of humanism, the very essence of the infinite person, Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). So broad was the range of his curiosity and creative genius that history has accorded him that rarest of titles: *uomo universale*, universal man. He is also called a **Renaissance man**, meaning a man of the broadest possible learning and a widely diverse range of interests and achievements. Since Leonardo’s time, that label has been given to many people, both the famous and the not-so-famous, who refused to be limited to just one field of endeavor, though it is doubtful that many will ever match what Leonardo accomplished: planning early versions of the airplane and the submarine; speculating about the human circulatory system long before William Harvey “officially” discovered the circulation of the blood; building the first hydrometer to measure the displacement of water; inventing the science of meteorology long before the proper instruments to make accurate predictions were available. His *Vitruvian Man*, a drawing based on the work of the architect Vitruvius, suggests a perfect

blend of art and science: an attempt to portray a realistic figure representing ideal proportions (Figure 1.5). And on top of all the scientific and technological contributions, there are his works of art, including the *Mona Lisa* (Figure 1.1).

The example of Leonardo da Vinci suggests that, while few may hope to approach his genius, all of us can do more with our lives than we are doing at this very moment. There are so many books to read, so much music to hear, so many plays to see, so many great films to view. We may not become Renaissance persons, but infinite choices await us. The more we absorb from the humanities, the more we expand our knowledge, our capacity for understanding both ourselves and others. In a sense we become infinite, intertwining with innumerable lives in myriad combinations.

Here are just three advantages of becoming an infinite person.

- First, the infinite person commits no crimes against humanity. He or she is no longer narrowly preoccupied with self and its immediate needs, its sense of having been unfairly used, its desire to avenge wrongs against itself.
- Second, the infinite person is free of rigid prejudices and never works consciously to restrict others from exercising their right to assemble, speak their minds openly, practice their own religion, and follow their own preferences, as long as, in being free, they do not themselves limit the freedom of others.
- Third, the infinite person does not jump to quick conclusions but looks at all sides of an issue before making a judgment, recognizes that no judgment is final, and is always willing to reconsider in the light of new data. This person is therefore not constrained by family and social traditions and willingly seeks out the source of imposed or inherited beliefs so as to reevaluate them. “That’s how we’ve always done it around here” is not the mark of the infinite person.

The book you are about to read is thus not only a visit to the treasure house of the humanities, the stupendous creative and intellectual achievements of human beings. It has the underlying purpose of convincing you that you cannot fail to want to expand your life, to fill every moment with art and thought, once you realize that all it takes is the willingness to do it.

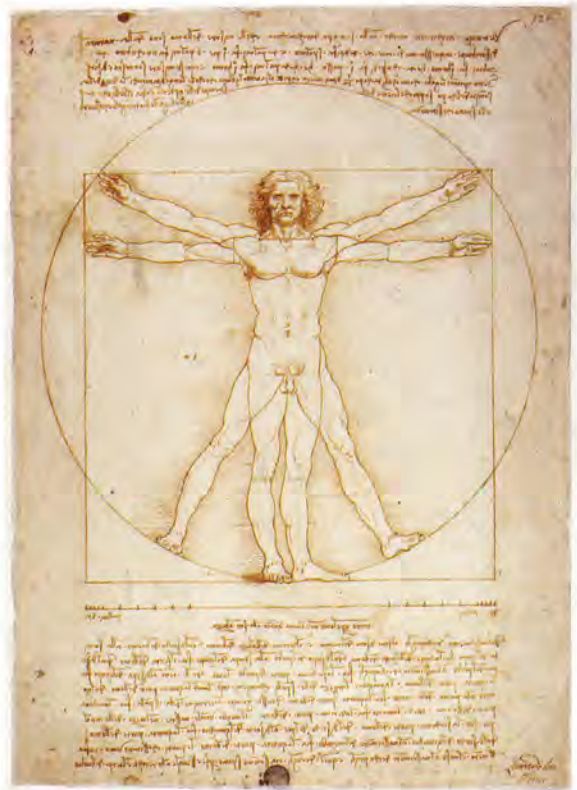


Figure 1.5 Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, c. 1490.

Why do you think this drawing has remained famous for over 500 years?

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## Looking Back

In this chapter,

- we discussed what we mean by the humanities and how the definition of the humanities has changed and broadened in recent centuries,
- we looked at the various gifts that we receive when we include the humanities in our lives, and
- we discussed the concept of the “infinite” person, and how Leonardo da Vinci represents this concept.

## Key Terms

**aesthetic** An experience in the arts or in life, such as watching a sunset, that we value for no reason beyond itself.

**beauty** A pleasing arrangement of parts that affects us aesthetically.

**discipline** In the humanities, a given art form—literature, visual art, music, drama, dance, and cinema—as well as a field of academic study (such as “literary theory” or “history of dance”).