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The Jefferson Lecture

On March 24, 1997, philosopher Stephen Toulmin delivered the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. In his lecture, "A Dissenter's Story," Toulmin cited modernity's complex origins from sixteenth-century humanism and seventeenth-century rationalism, and contended that the real fulfillment of the "promise of modernity" requires "looking for reasonable ways of matching the technical skills of our disciplines to the human claims of real life."

The seventeenth-century revolutions in science, mathematics, and philosophy led by Newton, Descartes, and Galileo must be viewed within the framework of their historical "situations," Toulmin argues, and against the backdrop of the work of the great humanists of the sixteenth century, such as Erasmus and Montaigne. "A realistic picture of seventeenth-century life," he prefaces in his 1989 work, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, "must now include both brilliant lights and dark shadows: both the successes of the new intellectual movements, and also the agonies of the religious wars that were their historical background."

As important an underpinning to late-twentieth-century reality as the quest for certainty inspired by Descartes's and Newton's work remains, Toulmin maintains that the skepticism, tolerance for dissent, and the multiplicity of ideas embraced by sixteenth-century thinkers have just as powerful an influence on modern thought. "What we have to do is make the technical and the humanistic strands in modern thought work together more effectively than they have in the past." He adds, "Technical excellence is no longer an end in itself. It's something which has to be kept in balance with humane consequences."

Stephen Toulmin was born in England in 1922. After earning a degree in mathematics and physics at King's College in Cambridge, he worked in radar for three years during World War II. Later he returned to Cambridge, where he earned his doctorate in philosophy in 1948. He became a lecturer in the philosophy of science at Oxford University in 1949. Since leaving Oxford in 1955, Toulmin has taught at Leeds, Brandeis, Michigan State University, University of Chicago, and Northwestern University, before becoming the Henry R. Luce Professor of Multiethnic and Transnational Studies at the University of Southern California.

Physicist, philosopher, historian of science, and ethical theorist, Toulmin says he has spent the past forty-eight years "opening all the doors that lead out of physics into other areas of reflection."

Toulmin has published a number of books over a period of thirty years including: *The Abuse of Casuistry* (with A. R. Jonsen, 1987), *The Return to Cosmology* (1982), *An Introduction to Reasoning* (with R. Reike and A. S. Janik, 1978), *Knowing and Acting* (1976), *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (with A. S. Janik, 1973), *Human Understanding* (1972), *The Ancestry of Science* (a series with J. Goodfield, 1961-65), *Foresight and Understanding* (1961), *The Uses of Argument* (1958), and *The Place of Reason in Ethics* (1949). His honors include the 1993 lecture for Queen Beatrix at the Royal Palace Foundation in Amsterdam and the 1992 International Society for Social Philosophy's first Book of the Year prize.

Today Toulmin and his wife Donna live and teach in a residential college at the University of Southern California. Both serve as faculty masters, and hold weekly dinners with students that are reminiscent of those Toulmin shared with his professor at Oxford, Ludwig Wittgenstein, in the 1940s. As he exhorts other philosophers to "come out of their self-imposed isolation and reenter the collective world of practical life and

shared human problems," so Toulmin mingles his theory and practice, by balancing a rich intellectual life with the life of the community.

The Jefferson Lectureship is the highest honor the federal government bestows for achievement in the humanities. It was established in 1972, and carries a \$10,000 stipend.