

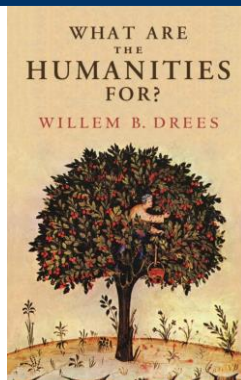
## What Are the Humanities For?

Willem B. Drees

Lecture for the Abraham Kuyper Center,

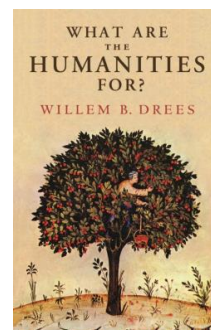
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, NL

29 November 2021



## Outline

I. A meaningful category?	6 sheets
Table of contents as outline	1 sheet
III. Understanding others	2 sheets
IV. Self-involving	2 sheets
V. Responsible scholarship	3 sheets
VI. Humans	3 sheets
VII. The value of the humanities	5 sheets
VIII. Some responses	2 sheets



## I. Humanities: a meaningful category?

Peter Harrison, "Defining and defending the humanities",  
Zygon 56 (3, Sept. 2021), p.680:

**"I am not entirely convinced that the humanities  
comprise a coherent domain, but wonder  
at the same time whether a rhetoric of coherence  
might be important for their defense."**

- The disciplinary landscape is historically contingent.
- The example of 'STEM': a useful label, despite incoherence.



## Background of my argument: academic politics

My own background: Physics, Religious studies/ theology, Philosophy  
2009-2012, Leiden: Vice-dean for education, School of Humanities

Global (languages, areas) & historical

2015-2018, Tilburg: Dean, School of Humanities

Online culture, communication, philosophy

Globalization, digitalization



Tilburg: Professor of 'philosophy of the humanities' > inaugural address  
*Naked Ape or Techno Sapiens? The Relevance of Human Humanities*

Audiences:

- o Within the school                      Internal coherence.
- o Board, fellow deans                  Humanities within Tilburg University.
- o External                                  Humanities are important & Tilburg contributes.



## Book project *What Are the Humanities For?*

Study leave at CTI, Princeton, January-May 2019 >  
draft *Human Humanities* (May 2019).

Yes, it is a matter of academic politics

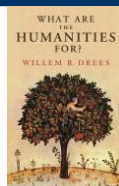
> Publisher changed the title and made blurb 'urgent'

Is 'humanities' also a meaningful category ?

'STEM': substantial connections; mathematical tools; ...

'Life sciences': two fundamental theories (evolution, molecular biology)

'Humanities': not via shared explanatory theories > coherence ?



## 'Canine, Alien and Human Humanities'

- *Dogs* know their humans: functional, limited
- *Aliens* might study humans, like we do zoology
- *Humans* engage *humans*; we are on both sides  
> **Human humanities.**



> Dual character of the humanities:

- o Outsider perspective (3d person): seeking objective knowledge
- o Insider perspective (1st and 2d person): our own identity & relations with others  
(Chemists consist of chemicals, but this has not the same impact)

Religious studies/ theology also has this dual character, as has philosophy

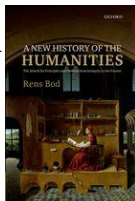
- o Academic distance, e.g., philological, historical, sociological, psychological studies
- o Self-involving, about one's own convictions and practices, identity, arguments



## Types of knowledge within the humanities

### Science-like knowledge:

- o Knowledge of **particulars**: of languages, events, authors, ...
  - o Discernment of **patterns** (e.g., in grammar)
- e.g., Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Patterns and Principles from Antiquity to the Present* (2013)



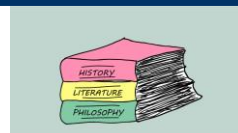
### Specific to the humanities:

- o Understanding others, what moves them, how they see the world
- o Self-understanding, 1<sup>st</sup> person perspective (philosophy, theology, history, ...)

## Defining the humanities

### Humanities: defining via examples?

- o Does not bring out coherence
- o Term 'humanities' is not an ordinary plural



### Tentative definition:

**Humanities are academic disciplines in which humans seek understanding of human self-understandings and self-expressions, and of the ways in which people thereby construct and experience the world they live in.**

2d order activity: an author writes; a scholar studies the novel and its reception  
And 3d order activity, e.g. philosophy & history of the humanities.

Feedback loop: humanities may influence the humans involved.

## II. Table of contents of the book

Canine, Alien and Human Humanities: An Introduction

### PART I. WHAT ARE THE HUMANITIES?

1. The Humanities
2. Understanding others
3. Self-involving: Philosophy and theology
4. Responsible scholarship

### PART II. WHO NEEDS THE HUMANITIES?

5. Professionals: How to live with interpretations
6. Humans
7. The value of the humanities

## III. Understanding others

### Knowledge and skills

- o Human tools: Languages
- o Human contexts: Area studies, cultural studies
  - Relevance: education, colonial service, trade, terror, nationalism, ...
  - Appropriation, e.g. *Sacred Books of the East* (late 19th century)
  - Area studies does not fit well in the disciplinary landscape

### Interpretation: Hermeneutics as a human necessity,

relating to others and their texts  
relating today to the past (also in law, religion, and so on)  
> what makes for the validity of interpretations?



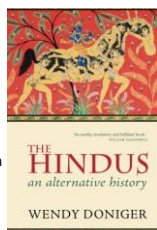
## Insights may be unwelcome to those others

Biblical scholarship (Erasmus, Spinoza, 19<sup>th</sup> century)  
> modernisms & fundamentalisms

*The Hindus* (Wendy Doniger, 2009)

- Penguin India took it off the market
- Doniger: influence of Victorian British:

"That's the Hinduism that Hindutva-vadis are defending, while they deny the one that the Christian missionaries hated and that I love and write about – the pluralistic, open-ended, endlessly imaginative, often satirical Hinduism. The Hindutva-vadis are the ones who are attacking Hinduism; I am defending it against them."



## IV. Self-Involving (1): Philosophy

- Self-involvement is also relevant outside philosophy and theology  
e.g., history: from our present we study the past; we represent that past today
- *Philosophy*: arguments and judgments  
Universal ambitions (Enlightenment)  
Judgements are not descriptions; they are self-involving



Not all that is important is universal:

"When I visit my brother in the hospital, or help my friend move, or stay up all night sowing my daughter a Halloween costume, I act neither for egoistic reasons nor for moral ones. ... Rather, I act out of love." (Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life* ..., 2010, p.4)

> Plural identities (individual and collective), including religions.

## Self-Involving (2): What about theology?

### Modern universities

- '3d person' knowledge, aspiring to be objective, factual
- pragmatic, e.g. which languages and cultures are studied
- philosophy, due to its ambition to be universal, argumentative

What about particular preferences? E.g., theology in the university?

### Separation Church and State in Dutch public universities, 1876 >

- o *History of religions*, as a new discipline
- o *Philosophy of religion*, rather than systematic theology / dogmatics
- o Various denominations: professors *with* the university, not *of* the university. evolved into religious studies as study of religions

Other models for handling the plurality of particular orientations  
a separate category & institutions (seminaries, PTHU, UvH)  
the *simplex ordo* institutions (VU, Tilburg, Nijmegen)  
German co-existence of Katholische and Evangelische Facultäten

## V. Responsible scholarship

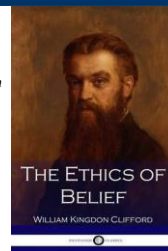
Reliability is morally important; ideas have consequences

Naomi Oreskes, Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoking to global warming* (2010)

Daniel Dennett (2000) on a virus that raised infant mortality and strengthened the power of the local despot.

"The virus they introduced was not a macromolecule but a meme: the idea that science was a 'colonial' imposition."

Malpractice insurance for philosophers and others in humanities?



## Value of 'value free' knowledge

Avoid partisan bias as a quality issue

Role-specific neutrality:

Professional and epistemic values (collaboration, reliability, ...)

But suspend personal preferences, like a referee in sports.



## Comparable to the sciences?

Yes, quest for reliable knowledge and the discovery of patterns.

But

- Laws in physics (gravity): unavoidable
- Political laws: prescriptive
- Laws in linguistics: pragmatic, neither binding nor prescriptive

Human insight into the way one is seen by others may influence behavior.

- Self-fulfilling and self-denying prophecies.
- 'Third person understanding' may be derailed by 'first person' actors.

## Table of contents as outline

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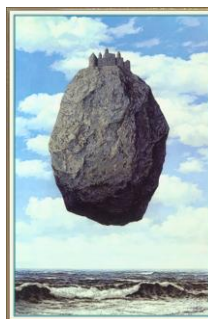
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## VI. Humans (1): Material and biological beings



R. Magritte, *The Château of the Pyrenees*, 1961

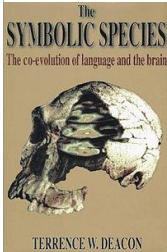
"Mountain peaks do not flow unsupported. They do not even rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one of its manifest operations."

John Dewey, 1934

*Circularity*: 'this sentence is false': fatal. Circularity is a fertile spiral in biology.



## Humans (2): Cultural Beings



**Language**  
 – also about what is *not* there: plans, hopes and dreams

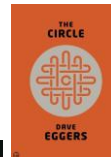
**Worldviews**  
 models *of* the world  
 models *for* the world

**Science** – how things are  
**Ethics** – how things ought to be  
 ‘Fact-value’ distinction is valuable, but human life needs both.

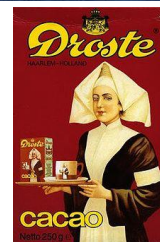


## Humans (3): Technological Beings

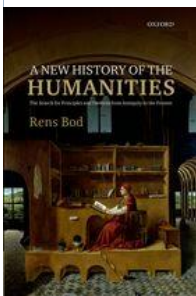
**Technology**  
 changes our world  
 changes our relations  
 changes our self-image



Will the circle close?



## VII. Value of the Humanities (1): Knowledge



**1. Fundamental knowledge**, comparable to the natural sciences

Use may come much later:  
 - Grammar > computer languages  
 - Biblical criticism > reconstruction of genetic histories

e.g., Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Patterns and Principles from Antiquity to the Present* (2013)



## 2. Useful knowledge

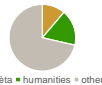
### 2.a. Business

Languages (German, Chinese)

*Alfa in Leiden:* Companies



Personell



### 2.b. Society

- Cleaning the Ganges
- Countering terrorism
- Addressing vaccine hesitancy
- The teacher needs to know more than the teacher teaches
- Data science needs reflection upon data culture & society

...  
 So too for almost any other topic that involves societal challenges.

## Useful: Culture and Contemplation?

### 2.c. Enriches culture

Contributes to preservation of heritage and understanding of arts and letters.

However, Shakespeare and Ibsen did not need the humanities.

Academic reflection might be counterproductive from the point of view of the practitioner – just as religious studies need not support religious practice.

### 2.d. Usefulness of uselessness



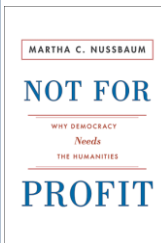
A domain of contemplation, need not pay off via action?

Not too helpful in political context.



## Does Democracy Need Humanities?

### 2.e. Democracy needs humanities



“We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. (...) The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance. What are these radical changes? The humanities and the arts are being cut away, in both primary/ secondary and college/ university education in virtually every nation in the world.”

*Are humanities scholars more humane?*



## The Value of the Humanities

### 3. Human humanities

*It is our nature to be reflective. We not only communicate but reflect on communication. We not only have a culture, we are always revising and creating culture. Thus, human humanities are natural to humans and necessary for the good of complex and quickly changing society. Not all reflection is academic, of course, but the study of humans is among the most human and humane things we humans can do.*

## VII. Responses: Disciplinary coherence?

Peter Harrison – disciplinary landscape is historically contingent



Michael Ruse – as a philosopher, no interest in literary studies; “the help the humanities can give to the hard sciences” (698)

Douglas Ottati (theologian at a liberal arts college):

“there is no single entirely satisfactory solution to the question of how to give due attention to the intensely self-involving character of plural religions. The best we can do is to undertake theology, religious studies, and philosophy of religion in close proximity to one another.” (704)

Humanities scholarship: important for ‘a humanist strand in theology’.

## VII. Responses: Responsible scholarship ?

Lisa Stenmark (theology/ religious studies)

- This view of the humanities is colonial, Western.
- “Because we live in a world of many worlds, the truth is always in parentheses, and there is no knowledge without an adjective – not knowledge, but *Western* knowledge.”
- Responsible scholarship should be partisan.

Donald Drakeman (law, religious studies, biotech entrepreneur)

“The issue on which we agree that is probably generating the strongest opposition at the moment is the idea that there should be ‘academic distance from ... political and ideological interests’, that scholarship should be ‘value-free’, and that it is important to have an environment characterized by ‘civility’ and ‘patience’.”

- importance of reliable knowledge, to serve people world wide.