

The Humanities

WE, HUMANS, WRITE TEXT MESSAGES, LOVE LETTERS, and manifestos. By our dress we distinguish ourselves from others. By the food we eat, the company we seek, the histories we present as our own, and the stories we tell we express our emotions, attitudes, and beliefs. We create works of art, to convey a message, to make money, or apparently for no reason at all. We do things, by speaking and in other ways. By our actions we shape the lives we live and the social, cultural, and material world we live in. We are actors.

We live in a world shared with others. Others we need to understand, though understanding does not always come easily. We experience others, past and present, as we encounter their art and culture, and thus learn how they present and understand themselves, their identities. This world we share with others has been shaped over time. We haven't started from scratch, but we are, for now, at the receiving end of history, while contributing to its future. History we encounter in the layout of our cities, in the objects we use, in the stories we hear, in the language we speak, in the ideas we have.

As we experience others, we may come to know them, their ways of speaking and acting. Much knowledge is implicit. When learning a second language alongside our mother tongue, we may notice similarities and differences – and thus start to think about the grammatical structure of these languages. So, too, for learning about the historical experiences of others, seeing similarities. Also, differences – the Dutch “Golden Age” appears differently for Dutch “burghers” than for inhabitants of the East Indies, now Indonesia, and differently for sailors who escaped poverty than for slaves shipped from Africa to the

Americas. By learning the perspectives of others, we may make explicit ideas about our situation that at first were only implicit. What appears to some to be self-evident thus may come to be seen as accidental. To deepen our knowledge of others and of ourselves, some of us go on to study in depth the ways in which humans present and express themselves.

In the *humanities* we study human languages, historical episodes, cultures, artistic expressions, ritual practices, religious beliefs, and much more. We study histories and languages of people far and near, and thereby we come to understand better our own language and history as well. By studying their art and their beliefs, we may come to reconsider our own beliefs and expressions as well. By developing our knowledge of humans, by engaging in the humanities, we learn to navigate this complex world with other humans. We are humans studying humans.

The self-reference of humans studying humans is typical for the humanities. It shows itself very clearly in disciplines such as philosophy or cultural studies. When studying other humans, we may compare their languages, cultures, and experiences to our own experiences in the world. We can learn from studying others. Though we make mistakes and errors as well, as bias and prejudice are human, too. Too often we have also dismissed others; noise made by barbarians was not really language, to draw upon an embarrassing stereotype. When others are treated thus, we thereby do injustice to their humanity by not approaching them as fellow humans who might have to offer something of interest to us.

The elementary take-home message of this book is the following. There is much to be discovered about humans, others and ourselves. This is not merely knowledge about something out there, an object that might be of academic interest. This is knowledge that engages ourselves as persons in relation to others, as we humans are *subjects* who develop such knowledge about *subjects*, about persons who also have an inner life, who experience the world, and who intend to shape their world. Even though the humanities and the natural sciences both seek knowledge, and thus to some extent are similar in kind, the self-reference involved in subjects studying subjects requires an approach that takes all those involved serious as persons. This “subjective” involvement of ourselves as humans who do

humanities makes the humanities different from the natural sciences. We are engaged in *human humanities*.

HUMANITIES: A DEFINITION

The humanities include a plurality of scholarly disciplines such as the study of history, languages, religions, and art from various times and places, and, often comparatively, linguistics, literary studies, cultural studies, philosophy, religious studies, and area studies. The word “humanities” appears to be a plural, just as “sciences” is a plural. There are individual sciences, such as chemistry and biology. However, there is no singular form of the humanities that serves as such; one cannot say that art history is “a humanity.” In English, “humanity” does not refer to individual disciplines, though in the nineteenth century in some of the ancient Scottish universities there was a professor of Humanity, that is, a professor of Latin.¹ In common parlance today, “humanity” refers to us as a collective, to human beings, the human species, and to human nature. This term has aesthetic and moral weight, when the term stands for “being civilized” or “realizing our full humanity,” or when one speaks of crimes against our common humanity.

As the English language is used today, “humanities” suggests a plurality. This plurality fits the humanities well, as the study of humans involves a wide variety of disciplines and approaches, some seeking knowledge that is as objective as feasible, others very sensitive to the way personal assumptions and interests shape the questions we ask and the methods we use. Despite significant diversity within the domain of the humanities, I seek to envisage these disciplines together, treating the humanities as one major domain within our human pursuit of knowledge.

The term “humanities” suggests something universal, applicable in all social and historical contexts, rather than China studies, European studies, American studies, or Classics – each more specific in space or time. In the sense used here, the term became prominent at first in the USA, and, to some extent, still reflects that origin. As an American

¹ Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 63.

academic, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, reflecting on lectures he gave at universities in Istanbul, notes,

I began my visit with the casual presumption that the humanities are a global undertaking that had been advanced with particular success in the United States, I ended convinced that the humanities reflect a specifically American or at least Western, modern, and secular version of human being and human flourishing, and that the entire concept might be a mere provincial prejudice.²

The humanities might be suspect as an imperialist extrapolation, apparently assuming that that which is familiar in one's own context would also be typical elsewhere. Despite such concerns, I am convinced that the ideals of scholarship involved do have global significance. Only an ambition that is universal allows our knowledge and understanding to be challenged for not doing enough justice to the diversity of human experiences and perspectives we encounter. Harpham's change of mind, as an example of self-reflective sensitivity to diversity due to context, past and present, is typical for the humanities.

To characterize the humanities, I offer the following 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.

This definition presents the humanities as a second-order activity. The basis is, of course, that as humans we express ourselves. A few of us write novels or poetry, or create art that expresses feelings of the artist or evokes a response in the observer. Behind all those human expressions we assume an inner world; humans have intentions when they act. So, too, when experiencing people, we encounter the cultural world in which they live. The world has not merely an impact on them, but all humans are subjects experiencing the world. Acting and

2 Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 8.

perceiving, creating and reading; such activities and experiences are typically human. This is the diverse realm of first-order activities which the humanities study.

In the humanities, we reflect upon human expressions. In literary studies we study texts humans have written; in art history other forms of expression; in cultural analysis the dynamics of individuals, groups, and societies; in linguistics and communication studies verbal and nonverbal communication. As the humanities study human expressions, it is a second-order activity. There must be humans before there can be humanities.

The humanities even include third-order projects. Historians can study the history of ways of writing history. Philosophers can seek to understand the humanities, that is, seek understanding of the understanding of human self-understandings and self-expressions. That is what I hope to do here; one might consider these pages a contribution to a philosophy of the humanities.

A definition of the humanities that also stresses human agency, is one given by Stefan Collini in his *What Are Universities For?* He writes,

the label “humanities” is now taken to embrace that collection of disciplines which attempt to understand, across barriers of time and culture, the actions and creations of other human beings considered as bearers of meaning, where the emphasis tends to fall on matters to do with individual and cultural distinctiveness and not on matters which are primarily susceptible to characterization in purely statistical or biological terms.³

In the humanities we approach other human beings “as bearers of meaning.” Their actions and creations are not random events, but are supposed to have meaning to them. If one encounters an object from a time long past, say a clay tablet with cuneiform inscriptions, experts try to decipher the text – perhaps a contract, a letter, or a fragment of the Gilgamesh epos. The scholar assumes that the scratches on the clay tablet convey something that was meaningful to those who made them, whether for practical purposes as an inventory of goods delivered or a record of promises made, or expressive of their identity

³ Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, p. 64.

as a record of their conquests or their beliefs about an afterlife. They were subjects too, experiencing their world, articulating their identity, and acting within their context.

However, the formulation by Collini focuses on “other human beings,” whereas the humanities may be about ourselves as well. Self-understanding is central to the rationale for the humanities articulated by Geoffrey Galt Harpham:⁴

The scholarly study of documents and artifacts produced by human beings in the past enables us to see the world from different points of view so that we may better understand ourselves.

I do not see why we should restrict ourselves to documents “from the past,” though a historical orientation characterizes much scholarship in the humanities, nor study in particular “documents,” even though “documents and artifacts” may be taken to include nonliteral features such as the layout of a city or the rituals of a community. But the confrontation with a plurality of “other points of view” makes the humanities an engaging area of scholarly study.

PURSUING KNOWLEDGE

The humanities provide knowledge, just as do other sciences. Whereas the definition given above started with the human as a subject, as someone who seeks understanding of the world, including understanding of the acts of other humans, one might also begin with the world as the object of study. Such an approach would be more typical of the natural sciences, but such an “objective” intention, providing knowledge of the world, is there also within the humanities. In order to clarify the character of the humanities as scholarly disciplines, we will begin with similarities and dissimilarities with the natural sciences.

They are similar in studying what is “out there,” *particulars*. Our cultural world has an enormous variety of languages, histories, artistic expressions, and much else, each worthy of careful study. So, too, has biology when it studies micro-organisms, plants, and animals in various ecosystems. So too in chemistry, as experiments are about

4 Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, p. 23 (italics in original).

particular substances interacting with each other. The study of particulars deserves priority; one cannot study linguistics without studying one or more languages.

Humanities provide us with knowledge of particulars in relation to the contexts in which they function. Religious, artistic, and cultural traditions; ritual practices and literatures; living conditions of families; and much else can be studied in detail and in depth, so that we may come to know a specific practice in its historical development and context. As an analogy from the natural sciences, one might think of biology. In botany and zoology, one studies plants and animals, to uncover their particular constitution, behavior, and development, relative to the ecological setting they are involved in. Or one might think of astronomy, where astrophysicists study galaxies, stars, and, today, even exoplanets, planetary systems around other stars, to uncover the variety that turns out to be there, and discover the conditions under which particular systems have formed and continue to exist. In the humanities, comparative research on particulars is important too, as it allows to discern patterns, or their absence, and thus helps us see what is specific to a particular human practice.

The level of analysis, and thus the units under consideration, may differ from one research project to another. It may be a history of the Roman Empire or of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, but it may also be a study of one burial site, a single poem, or even the grammatical functions of one word. The more focus, the greater the depth that can be achieved. As units of analysis, one may think of cultural groups that are fairly homogeneous, relative to their wider environment, say when studying migrant minorities in a multicultural society. But though focusing on the plurality of groups may be useful as an approximation, diversity at the individual level is always even greater. Many influences come together in an individual life; persons may have multiple identities. So, too, for works of art, historical developments, and other human phenomena: As expressions of human inventiveness, as different from all others, they are unique. In their “singularity,” human expressions – in literature, art, and otherwise – are meaningful, and, hence, relevant for research.⁵

5 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Languages change, and so do religions, cultural traditions, styles in art and literature, and much else. They may change due to migration, by adaptation to new circumstances, and by appropriation of elements from others. They may also change due to the fact that they are studied. The knowledge outsiders develop may have an impact on the social and cultural reality that is studied. In this respect, the situation in the humanities differs from research in astrophysics; our knowledge of other planetary systems does not change those. In biology, the human presence does change ecosystems, but ecosystems are not directly influenced by the ideas of biologists, but by our practices, whether those of tourists or of conservationists.

Let me illustrate the influence of the humanities on the human practice studied with an example about Zoroastrianism, a religious tradition that arose in Persia centuries “Before the Common Era,” BCE, according to the Western calendar. Within this tradition, rituals play a major role, supported by their collection of sacred literature, the Avesta. One part of this text, the Yashna, is the text of the daily high ritual. In the nineteenth century, a German scholar of Sanskrit, Martin Haug, argued on the basis of linguistic analysis that a tiny portion of the Yashna, five poems called the Gathas, were in a more archaic dialect than the rest of the Avesta, and hence, he concluded, these were older. Zoroastrians might have responded with indifference, “so what?” Or they could have rejected the scholarly conclusion, as at odds with the way they understood their own tradition. Something else happened; the scholarly discovery was appropriated by the Parsis, the Zoroastrians of the Indian subcontinent. Within Zoroastrianism, the Gathas now have become more important than other texts in the Avesta.⁶

In this case, the scholar not only studied a tradition; through his work he redefined it. The language of a tradition may change as well, as scholarly, analytical concepts, and insights may become actor concepts and thereby more indirectly reshape the self-understanding of

6 Albert F. De Jong, “Historians of Religion as Agents of Religious Change,” in Willem B. Drees and Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld (eds.), *The Study of Religion and the Training of Muslim Clergy in Europe* (Leiden University Press, 2007), 195–218, p. 206f.

the believers. Thus, in studying cultural traditions, one should be alert to the possibility that these have been influenced by earlier scholarship.

An interest of the scholar is to gather knowledge about others, in their linguistic, historical, and cultural diversity. In the effort to learn about humans in their diversity, the scholar should not be judgmental, but rather be methodologically agnostic. The scholarly interest lies in what words or practices mean (or meant) to the humans studied. The question is not whether the scholar shares those beliefs or values. The intention is to understand them. How do they see their world? How do they see their history, and how do they relate to their past? How do they use their language? What would they consider art?

When we ask what was meaningful to them, we treat them as persons, as subjects. Thus, though there is a major similarity with the natural sciences, in seeking to envisage the diversity of life forms and of cultural practices, there is a difference in the nature of the object. The objects of the humanities are themselves also subjects; they are humans using language to communicate, engaging in practices meaningful to them.

Underlying similarities and mechanisms are of great interest to biologists studying the multitude of life forms. So, too, for scholars in the humanities. Though there are many different human languages and cultures, there are similarities between human experiences and practices at different times and places. At least, such is the case according to Rens Bod in his book *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present*. The humanities even preceded the natural sciences by developing systematic approaches and discovering patterns in human languages, literatures and other texts, music, and other art forms, as described in grammar, musical theory, logic, art theory, and many other disciplines. In philology, early modern humanists such as Erasmus have discovered a lot about types of unintentional mistakes and intentional changes that slip into texts when copied. Lessons learned about the way to construct the history of a text from tiny copying errors, served well when humans started to construct biological history from mutations in DNA. Computer programming owes much to linguistics, with its insights about recursive rules. Bod thus presents the humanities as

sciences, searching for patterns, “general laws” based on sophisticated observations and occasional experiments.

In seeking to uncover patterns, the emphasis is on what humans do, rather than on what the texts, objects, and practices mean to the people involved. Bod considers briefly whether there has not been a major shift in the nineteenth century, with the emergence of a distinction between the natural sciences, with the interest in explanations in terms of natural laws (*erklären*), and the humanities, focusing on unique events, to be understood as meaningful to humans (*verstehen*). However, Bod argues that the main change in the nineteenth century was institutional, separating faculties of natural sciences and of humanities in the universities, rather than substantial, as research in both domains continued to look for patterns.

Bod judges that in more recent times, in the second half of the twentieth century, a significant split arose *within* the humanities, a split between those who search for patterns, for instance via computational analysis, and, in contrast, those who emphasize the unique character of events, an orientation typical of postmodern movements. The search for patterns is dominant in linguistics, whereas a pattern-rejecting orientation is more common in literary studies, musicology, and art history. Bod finds precursors to this pattern-rejecting tradition in the Hellenistic world of the third century BCE. Whereas in Alexandria, arguments based on regularity-oriented analogies between forms of words were used, he finds that in Pergamon, Chrysippus and others were focusing primarily on differences and exceptions. Their method was less systematic.

Nevertheless, the anomalistic approach produced a number of extraordinarily original works. The anomalists – unlike the analogists, whose work was mostly formal – produced erudite commentaries. For example, Demetrius of Scepsis wrote a series of thirty books about the Trojan forces, which were addressed in fewer than sixty-two lines in the entire *Iliad*. Every point of view was dissected by the author, using a vast quantity of literature, local and oral traditions, history, mythology, geography, poetry, and observations by travelers – in other words, he called upon the entirety of classical knowledge to contribute to the interpretation of the text. This detailed and particularistic approach was developed in Pergamon and since then has never disappeared from the humanities. We will come across

anomalists in many different guises. It survived both the Middle Ages and the early modern age, was regenerated in nineteenth-century hermeneutics, and reached a provisional pinnacle in twentieth-century poststructuralism.⁷

They prefer to focus on the author's intentions and the pragmatic ways in which texts are used, rather than on general patterns. Bod remains reserved about the rule-rejecting approach: "The erudite, detailed exegeses from Pergamon are perhaps the finest that the classical humanities generated. But is it scholarship or literary art? Whatever the case may be, the results of the anomalists cannot be verified empirically, let alone replicated. But then again, that was far from their intention."⁸

With respect to the disciplinary landscape in our time, Bod articulates similar reservations about cultural studies. They have no clear method, though, nonetheless, they may uncover trends and patterns not discerned before. "For example, new relationships between power and knowledge have surfaced, and persistent myths about the accessibility of the digital world and the oneness of national identity have been negated. This 'boundless diversity of present-day culture' is precisely what cultural studies is aiming at. As a hybrid discipline, however, it lacks a clear basis that guarantees any controllability."⁹

Bod's preference is clearly on the side of well-structured, methodical analysis. He expects that the humanities will benefit from cognitive approaches, importing knowledge from psychology, and from digital approaches that provide new tools to analyze texts and other data, and hence will allow us to ask new questions. The rise of new disciplines such as media studies and cultural studies, drawing on methods from various fields, is also productive, though he warns for the danger "lurking in the uncritical combination of different scholarly fields."¹⁰ It seems to me, that someone speaking on behalf of cultural studies, broadly conceived, might raise the same concern about the appropriation of methods from psychology and computer sciences, as these

7 Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Patterns and Principles from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 33

8 Bod, *A New History of the Humanities*, p. 35

9 Bod, *A New History of the Humanities*, p. 342.

10 Bod, *A New History of the Humanities*, p. 362.

may make us focus on some questions at the expense of questions inspired by other perspectives.

Bod's emphasis in his *New History of the Humanities* is on pattern seeking approaches, which he finds again and again at various places and times in different research areas. But at the end of his book he speaks in favor of diversity within the humanities.

I started this book with a quest for pattern-seeking activities in the humanities, but towards the end it emerges that the pattern-rejecting tradition is at least as fascinating. We would be better advised not to just put up with the versatility of the humanities, but to embrace it.¹¹

Even this strong advocate of humanities as pattern-seeking, similar to the sciences, thus expects a positive contribution from an orientation that emphasizes uniqueness over regularities and similarities.

In the search for patterns, and perhaps even laws, and in the effort to understand the diversity of particulars, the humanities may be comparable to the natural sciences, especially to those that have a temporal and thus "a historical" dimension, such as astronomy and biology. Scientists are studying individual phenomena and processes, say galaxies, plants, or bacteria, and their behavior, and they seek to grasp the underlying mechanisms that gave rise to this diversity. So, too, do scholars in the humanities. But we ourselves are humans. We are not just studying others; we engage with them, as fellow humans; we act, as humans do. As the study of humans, the humanities may be compared to the social sciences – and there, too, we encounter similarities and differences.

AGENTS AND ACTORS

In *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction*, Martin Hollis distinguishes between humans as agents and as actors. As he uses these terms, one might consider *agents* all entities that change their environment. Even the weather is an agent. Agents are causally effective; the wind may push a boat forward gently. Blowing angrily, the storm may make trees topple. "Gently" and "angrily" are nice metaphors. However, animism is not a live option for us. The wind does not

11 Bod, *A New History of the Humanities*, p. 363.

intend anything by making a tree fall; it just blows. Neither “gently” nor “angrily” is applicable, except for the way the wind is experienced by humans. We might explain why the wind blows by offering a causal explanation in terms of areas with high pressure and low pressure; we would not refer to its intentions or its mood. Similarly, one may have an economic model for the most efficient, “rational” choices consumers will make to satisfy their preferences. Such a model may draw on game theory. In such a way, the analysis of human behavior abstracts from their moods, principles, and reasons.

But humans are not merely agents, whose behavior may be modelled. Humans are also *actors*, who act for a reason, who have intentions. Whereas with the explanatory approach, rules may be descriptive, to be discovered as statistical patterns in observations, for human actors rules can be prescriptive, normative, indicating how one should act. At least how, according to the people involved, one should act, drawing on their values and ideals. When treating humans as actors, we recognize their inner lives, the motives that may drive them, the meaning they may attach to certain practices, and the interpretations they give to the world. With the distinction between considering humans as agents and as actors, Hollis distinguished between two approaches to human behavior, characterized by the words *explanation* and *understanding*.

This distinction emerged in the nineteenth century as a way to understand the humanities, or in the scholarly German of the period, the *Geisteswissenschaften*, well before the social sciences in their modern form emerged. Hollis associates “explaining” with a naturalistic approach, seeking to explain and predict what happens by drawing on models that include various causal factors. In contrast, “understanding” is associated with an interpretative approach. “Its central proposition is that the social world must be understood from within, rather than explained from without. Instead of seeking the causes of behavior, we are to seek the meaning of action. Actions derive their meaning from the shared ideas and rules of social life and are performed by actors who mean something by them.”¹² Hollis considers

12 Martin Hollis, *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 16–17; similarly, Martin Hollis, *Reason in Action: Essays in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

this a rival tradition within the social sciences; it may be more typical of cultural anthropology than of economics. He does not discuss the humanities as such, but one might use these distinctions to make clear that in the humanities, the emphasis is on humans as actors, who have an inner life, whereas in the social sciences the explanatory orientation with its emphasis on models, statistics, and aspirations of objectivity, tends to take the first place.

In the humanities we also have a quest for explanatory models. This is more clearly the case when we consider not the individual level but larger collectives. In the context of explanatory approaches, Hollis stresses that individual agents operate in the context of larger wholes, structures, or systems; to a large extent, their behavior is determined by the context in which they operate. So too, of course, when we speak: if we want to be understood, we draw upon the language that is available to us, follow its grammatical rules and operate with the words, whose meanings may be looked up in dictionaries. But we use the available vocabulary and grammatical rules to express our intentions or feelings; what we *do* with language goes beyond the linguistic system. We also do not even have to follow its regularities, as we may use language in creative ways. The rules of a language are not causes that determine how we must speak; they are tools that we affirm or revise, to express ourselves.

Approaching humans as *actors*, to whom the world means something, who have intentions, who act for reasons, aligns well with common sense, with our personal interactions in life, outside the scholarly world. In the humanities we seek to understand others, our fellow humans. Scholarship in the humanities aspires to be a quest to understand the self-understanding of another person or community, to understand how they experience the world, and to learn from the others I encounter, perhaps even to engage in a dialogue with others. In the way we speak about such engagement, there is in grammar the second person, the moment I address you and you speak to me. We encounter others, and engage each other. Does a message come across as intended? Do I understand you correctly?

A technical term for such issues of interpretative understanding, and potential misunderstanding, is *hermeneutics*. Not only do we seek knowledge about others in their specificity, and perhaps strangeness.

Those others are fellow humans, and we might therefore learn from them something relevant to ourselves as well. Or, at least, we owe it to them as humans to try to understand their motives, the way the world appears to them. That we owe it to them is a moral conviction, reflecting the moral weight of speaking of humanity. How might we come to see the world if we came to share their perspective?

Such work in the humanities might develop from research that focuses on specific ideas and particular practices, combined with some sense of general patterns that helps to make it intelligible how their view reflects their place and time, and how it might be appropriated in other circumstances such as mine. It involves scholarly knowledge, but moves in a different direction than one would do in a quest for patterns. The movement is not toward a phonetic script or some other tool that abstracts from the particular, and thereby would allow for comparative or historical, diachronic analysis. However, neither does a scholarly effort to understand someone else imply that one should replace analysis by empathy, that understanding necessarily involves agreement.

The effort to understand the ideas and actions of others and consider their potential relevance for me, goes well beyond the academic distance considered typical of the natural sciences. It also goes beyond the “objective” aspirations, in the description and analysis of particulars and the search for general patterns, described above. Nevertheless, it should be a serious, scholarly effort. There is something to be discovered, something truthful and interesting about the meaning the world has to someone else. In the next chapter we will begin our exploration of the humanities by developing further this dimension of the humanities, as an effort to get to know fellow humans.

We humans care about ourselves. Who am I? What is troubling me? What can I believe? What is meaningful to someone else, may have meaning for me. Insights about others, may help us understand ourselves. Reflexivity in the humanities brings us to a fourth type of knowledge. Whereas the search for knowledge about particulars and patterns is fairly similar to research in the natural sciences, the hermeneutical focus considered above, and this self-reflexive move are specific to the humanities.

We may reflect on reasoning: How should I argue? What are sound arguments? What are the criteria? Similarly, about moral and aesthetic

judgements: What should I do? What are the criteria for sound moral deliberation and for aesthetic appreciation? What is the status of moral claims? There are methodological and meta-ethical questions, about the conditions for life, knowledge, and action. As we live our lives, we implicitly understand our own existence and obligations, we have a “practical self-understanding.”

To reflect upon our self-understanding, our assumptions, and biases, our identity, is typical of philosophy. But it also involves the way we relate to the historical legacies that shape us and our context. This includes cultural and national legacies, for most of Europe varieties of the Christian tradition, humanism, Enlightenment, and modernity; elsewhere, other legacies might be more relevant. The study of the religious beliefs and practices of others is part of the humanities, but as a reflection upon one’s identity and convictions in relation to traditional resources, systematic theology and humanistic philosophy can be considered part of the humanities too. The humanities as self-understanding, as reflection upon our judgements and our identities, will be central to the third chapter.

After having considered the humanities as the effort to understand others and ourselves, we will turn in the fourth chapter to the humanities as responsible scholarship. Together, these three chapters develop my view of the humanities as a scholarly domain, as an answer to the question of *Part I What Are the Humanities?* The chapters in the second part of the book will consider the humanities beyond the academic context.

WHO NEEDS THE HUMANITIES?

Texts, whether literature, holy books, or laws, are the material for scholarly interpretative analysis. However, they also form the fabric of our social life. Not only scholars are engaged in interpretation, but so, too, are lawyers, religious leaders, and many others. To what extent is their work guided by the same standards as scholarly interpretation in the humanities? We will consider the role of professional interpretation, in particular in legal and religious contexts, in Chapter 5.

Humanities are understood here as a second-order activity, by humans, about humans. To understand the humanities better, in the

sixth chapter we will reflect upon “human nature,” upon the animal that is central to the humanities.

The humanities operate in today’s world. Why would it be relevant to invest some of our time and resources in the humanities? In the final chapter, we will argue for the relevance of the humanities, on the basis of the understanding of the humanities developed in the preceding chapters. As a preview, let us consider three different approaches, argued for in recent years.

A hermeneutical motive, and, to some extent, also a self-reflective one, is central to Martha Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*.¹³ She emphasizes the development of empathy, of appreciating the perspectives of others, the ability to spot abuse of language and of power, and the ability to engage in civil disagreement and hence political discourse.

The emphasis on knowledge that aspires to be as objective as feasible, especially knowledge of patterns, is central to *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* by Rens Bod. Fundamental research, also in the humanities, may become useful because it provides insight in fundamental patterns. The focus should be on knowledge itself, not on its application, as fundamental knowledge in the long run delivers the best applications.

In *The Value of the Humanities*, literary scholar Helen Small offers a more pluralistic view of the humanities. Smart has reservations about an overstatement of the critical public role, but neither does she share the exclusive emphasis on science-like knowledge. Small holds that “the humanities matter for their own sake.”¹⁴ I agree with Helen Small that the humanities matter intrinsically, for their own sake. That is why my argument for the relevance of the humanities needs to start with a reflection on the character of the humanities. Which brings us back to the main ambition of this book, understanding the humanities, beginning in the next chapter, on the claim that in the humanities we seek to understand fellow humans.

13 Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Society Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

14 Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 6.