

What is it to be human?

On the humanities and practical self-understanding

Conference programme

Final conference of the NWO Horizon research project

What can the humanities contribute to our practical self-understanding?



Utrecht University



Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research

Monday April 18

17.00-19.00	Public lecture (in Dutch): Het verdriet van de wetenschap: hoe haar verhalen verborgen blijven	Trudy Dehue Responses by Annemarie Kalis and Ingrid Robeyns Chair: Jos de Mul	Utrecht's Centrum voor de Kunsten Domplein 4, Utrecht
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Tuesday April 19

09.00	<i>Registration</i>		
9.30-9.45	Opening	Keimpe Algra Dean of the Faculty of Humanities	Vijverzaal 1&2
9.45-10.45	In praise of idleness? The work of the humanities	Helen Small Chair: Marcus Düwell	Vijverzaal 1&2
10.45-11.15	<i>Coffee break</i>		
11.15-13.15	Parallel sessions I		Berkzaal, Hazelaarzaal, Iepzaal
13.15-14.15	<i>Lunch</i>		Vlonders buffet
14.15-15.45	Parallel sessions II		Berkzaal, Hazelaarzaal, Iepzaal, Zwaanzaal
15.45-16.15	<i>Coffee break</i>		
16.15-18.15	The decline and revival of ethical reasoning Back to the 3 R's: rights, responsibilities & reasoning	Onora O'Neill Kenneth Westphal Chair: Wim Drees	Vijverzaal 1&2
18.30	<i>Dinner for all participants</i>		Vlonders buffet

Wednesday April 20

9.00-11.00	Philosophers and Catastrophes: the political impact and responsibility of the humanities in the eyes of Helmuth Plessner	Carola Dietze	Vijverzaal 1&2
	Philosophy and non-discursive experience: a Wittgensteinian perspective	Martin Stokhof	
		Chair: Thony Visser	
11.00-11.15	<i>Coffee break</i>		
11.15-13.15	Parallel sessions III		Berkzaal, Hazelaarzaal, Iepzaal, Zwaanzaal
13.15-14.15	<i>Lunch</i>		Vlonders buffet
14.15-15.15	Results of the research programme “What can the humanities contribute to our practical self-understanding?”	Marcus Düwell & Wim Drees	Vijverzaal 1&2
15.15-15.30	<i>Coffee break</i>		
15.30-17.00	Keynote and dialogue: The self as agent and process: a view from the systems approach	Denis Noble & Jos de Mul	Vijverzaal 1&2
17.00	<i>Reception and closing</i>		

Parallel sessions I

The humanities and the natural sciences: interpretations of the human being	Cultural and aesthetic expressions as manifestations of practical self-understanding	Normative conceptions of the human being
Location: Berkzaal	Location: Hazelaarzaal	Location: Iepzaal & Wilgzaal
Chair: Naomi van Steenbergen	Chair: Rob van Gerwen	Chair: Sem de Maagt
Niels van Miltenburg <i>Utrecht University</i> Against neuro-reductionism	Britt Harrison <i>Independent</i> Cinematic humanism inaugurated	Yu Xia <i>KU Leuven</i> A naturalistic narrative of human morality
Annemarie van Stee <i>Utrecht University</i> Self-understanding in cognitive neuroscience	Peter Derkx <i>Utrecht, UvH</i> The contribution of literary studies to gerontology: practical self-understanding?	Johannes Schick <i>University of Cologne</i> Participation, invention, transformation: Gilbert Simondon's technoanthropology
Maurits in 't Veld <i>Radboud University</i> On human niche construction	Odile Heynders <i>Tilburg University</i> Gehen, ging, gegangen. An imaginary scenario as format for self-critique	Veronica Vasterling <i>Radboud University</i> What is human about human life?
Mira Vegter <i>Radboud University</i> Precision medicine; self-understanding in a molecularised framework	Joachim Duyndam <i>Utrecht, UvH</i> Tell me who are your models, and I'll tell you who you are	

Parallel sessions II

Cultural and aesthetic expressions as manifestations of practical self-understanding	General questions	Normative conceptions of the human being	General questions
Location: Berkzaal	Location: Hazelaarzaal	Location: Iepzaal & Wilgzaal	Location: Zwaanzaal
Chair: Kirsten Pols	Chair: Wout Cornelissen	Chair: Joel Anderson	Chair: Jamie Draper
Jana Bochet <i>University of Zürich</i> External view as a key to self-understanding	Henk-Jan Hoekjen <i>Utrecht University</i> Spinoza on nature and the human animal	Rutger Claassen <i>Utrecht University</i> Social agency as a two-level concept	Dascha Düring <i>Utrecht University</i> Legitimation crisis? The humanities as useless disciplines
Trijsje Franssen <i>University of Amsterdam</i> Imagination in the humanities	Simon Truwant <i>KU Leuven</i> Cassirer's philosophical commitment to practical self-understanding	Sem de Maagt <i>Utrecht University</i> From rational agents to human beings: on the role of empirical anthropology in Kantian constructivism	Noortje Delissen <i>Utrecht University</i> The intrinsic value of the humanities
Rob van Gerwen <i>Utrecht University</i> Humanities: science or art criticism?	Natalia Danilkina <i>University of Groningen</i> Nicolai Hartmann's practical philosophy	Fleur Jongepier <i>Radboud University Nijmegen</i> Practical self-knowledge and the circumstances of deliberation	Luca Demontis <i>Modena</i> Historical thought as an education for pluralism. Isaiah Berlin and Stuart Hampshire on the role of humanities

Parallel sessions III

Normative conceptions of the human being	General questions	Normative conceptions of the human being	General questions
Location: Berkzaal	Location: Hazelaarzaal	Location: Iepzaal & Wilgzaal	Location: Zwaanzaal
Chair: Annemarie Kalis	Chair: Wout Cornelissen	Chair: Ingrid Robeyns	Chair: Annemarie van Stee
Maureen Junker-Kenny <i>Trinity College Dublin</i> Test cases for normative conceptions: Habermas's reading of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard as 'postmetaphysical' thinkers	George Papandreopoulos <i>Staffordshire University</i> Reflections on Nietzsche's anti-human overhumanism	Nikolai Münch <i>Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena</i> The role of practical self-understandings in the human-enhancement debate	Daan van den Berg <i>Utrecht University</i> The value of having multiple frames of interpretation
Jesse Mulder <i>Utrecht University</i> The myth of the "positive human"	Maarten Coolen <i>University of Amsterdam</i> On the nature of self-understanding	Rob Zwijnenberg <i>Leiden University</i> CRISPR and the future of humans – why the humanities need bio-art urgently	Angela Roothaan <i>Free University Amsterdam</i> Achieving our humanity? Postcolonial criticism of the idea of humanity
Josh Wretzel <i>Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg</i> The value-laden organism: Hegel on human nature, normativity, and philosophical thinking	Kirsten Pols <i>Utrecht University</i> Practical self-understanding and biography; the life and work of Helmuth Plessner	Shachar Brenner <i>Tel-Aviv University</i> The essentiality of the humanities to the understanding of the essence of Autism	Jonathan Keir <i>Tübingen University</i> Experience itself as knowledge: Defending the 21st century humanities from scientism
Naomi van Steenbergen <i>Utrecht University</i> The ethical status of self-deception	Eoin Carney <i>University of Dundee</i> System and interpretation: Paul Ricoeur on the complementary tasks of explaining more and living well	Yuija Song <i>Purdue University</i> What is self-empathy?	Maciej Musiał <i>Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań</i> The contemporary importance of self-understanding and the theory of culture as the center of integrated humanities

Keynote abstracts

Helen Small

In praise of idleness? The work of the humanities

This lecture engages with Bernard Russell's provocative essay of 1934, 'In Praise of Idleness?', as a means to opening up a debate about the special nature, and (historically, at least) the privileged conditions of humanistic scholarship as a form of state sponsored work. It asks whether, or to what degree, the special protections Russell identified as necessary for the support of university teaching and research still pertain. It explores the difficulties placed in the way of effective advocacy for the humanities by the (sometimes stark) appearance of differential conditions between academic labour and labour beyond the university. And it asks whether we might advocate more effectively for the modern university by acknowledging how far that appearance is correct—and how far it is a fiction.

Onora O'Neill

The decline and revival of ethical reasoning

The early twentieth century witnessed a widespread loss of confidence in ethical reasoning of many sorts, including both ethical and political reasoning. Supposedly both have been resuscitated since WW2, and now flourish. I shall suggest that the revival of ethical reasoning remains fragile, and that this is evident in the dominance of discussions of rights rather than duties in political philosophy, in widespread lack of interest in duties without counterpart rights, and in the great attention paid to individualistic conceptions of autonomy and to individual preferences. I shall pose questions about the possibility of taking a revival of ethical reasoning, and of other forms of normative reasoning, further and gesture to some issues that would need to be addressed.

Kenneth Westphal

Back to the 3 R's: rights, responsibilities & reasoning

Kant's motto for enlightenment, Sapere aude! (GS 8:35), captures important aspects of how the best of Enlightenment thought was radical in the literal sense of probing the roots of fundamental concepts, principles and institutions, in both the natural and in the moral sciences. Here I reexamine a fundamental Enlightenment innovation that has been lost beneath rather too much academic and administrative fray: a sound reconception of how to identify and to justify basic, universally valid moral principles without appeal (whether pro or contra) to moral realism. Kant's motto for enlightenment thus also holds for our knowledge and understanding of the Enlightenment, and of enlightenment. Kant's critique of our finite, limited but vitally important powers of rational judgment identifies central aims, methods and skills of liberal education which are increasingly important in our globalizing, yet also destabilizing world, in which these aims, methods and skills go unremarked even by advocates of active learning, of the liberal arts and of their vital roles in today's rapidly changing world.

Carola Dietze

Philosophers and Catastrophes: the political impact and responsibility of the humanities in the eyes of Helmuth Plessner

In my presentation, I will explore the different functions that Helmuth Plessner ascribed to the humanities in general and to philosophy in particular. I will examine different texts written by him in the years of the Weimar Republic, during the “Third Reich” and the Second World War, as well as in the Federal Republic of Germany, briefly placing these texts in their respective historical and biographical contexts. Special attention will be given to his book *Die verspätete Nation*, written in Groningen in 1934/35 in order to explain to his Dutch audience why the National Socialist Party had been able to take over power in Germany in 1933 – a book which became influential especially in West-Germany in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Martin Stokhof

Philosophy and non-discursive experience: a Wittgensteinian perspective

As a humanities discipline philosophy is in the odd position that it has to define and defend not only its methodology, but also its subject matter. Where the domains of many humanities disciplines are relatively unproblematic, philosophy has struggled with carving out a space it can call its own. In this talk an attempt is made to characterise where and how philosophy can contribute in a way that differs from other disciplines, both humanities and social and natural sciences. Wittgenstein’s analyses of aesthetic experience, certainties and religious beliefs will thereby serve as a starting point.

Denis Noble

The self as agent and process: a view from the systems approach

The systems approach to biology, as expressed in *The Music of Life*, leads to radically different ideas of the self and human agency from the reductionist view inherited by modern science from Descartes. The lecture will highlight the role of contextual logic in the process by which meaning and intention arise in human agency (and indeed that of other organisms). Agency is then viewed as a process rather than an object. An important consequence is that it does not make sense to look for the ‘secret of consciousness’ in the brain (or specifically in the Claustrum – the modern version of Descartes’ pineal gland). Agency is an attribute of the whole organism in its interactions with other organisms. Causality is also viewed differently. There is no privileged level of causation, which is the central statement of the theory of biological relativity.