



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Humanities across Time and Space: Four Challenges for a New Discipline

Bod, R.

**DOI**

[10.5040/9781350199095](https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350199095)

**Publication date**

2023

**Document Version**

Submitted manuscript

**Published in**

Writing the History of the Humanities

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Bod, R. (2023). Humanities across Time and Space: Four Challenges for a New Discipline. In H. Paul (Ed.), *Writing the History of the Humanities: Questions, Themes and Approaches* (pp. 345-363). (Writing history). Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350199095>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# **Humanities across Time and Space: Four Challenges for a New Discipline<sup>1</sup>**

*Rens Bod*

University of Amsterdam

rens.bod@gmail.com

## **Introduction**

While histories within the context of a single humanities discipline have been written for more than a century, it is only over the last decade that we have witnessed histories that go beyond single humanities disciplines and that bring together different fields, periods or regions.<sup>2</sup> It thus comes as a surprise that virtually no studies go into the methodological problems of the new *métier*. Questions abound: What do we mean by “bringing together” different humanities fields across time and space? Should we study their shared concepts, methods, virtues, research practices, historical actors, pedagogical practices, personal interactions, or yet something else? And when in history can we speak of the “humanities” as a group of disciplines? And how can we compare the humanities from different parts of the world?

In this essay, I will discuss four methodological challenges which I believe to be constitutive for the history of the humanities as a field. These are the challenges of demarcation, anachronism, eurocentrism and incommensurability. Any history of the humanities that goes beyond the scope of a single discipline, period or region will have to address at least one of these challenges. While none of my challenges have absolute solutions, I will give a motivated choice for each of them. I will argue that my solutions provide a viable way to write a comparative history of the humanities, and that we can therefore speak of them as maxims. Although the preferred solutions will differ among historians, the challenges remain the same. At the end of my essay, I will discuss other possible solutions to the challenges, as well as other possible challenges for the history of the humanities, such as the challenge of forgotten scholars, non-academic humanities and colonial humanities. Finally, I will go into the relation between the history of the humanities and the history of science and knowledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a preliminary version of a chapter written for the volume *Writing the History of the Humanities: Questions, Themes, and Approaches*, edited by Herman Paul for Bloomsbury’s ‘Writing History’ series. The author will be grateful to receive comments and suggestions. He will acknowledge and incorporate all useful suggestions received before March 15, 2021 (which is the deadline of the chapter). Later suggestions may still be included, but this depends on the time schedule of the publication of the volume.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn (eds), *The Making of the Humanities*, 3 volumes, Amsterdam University Press, 2010, 2012, 2014; Jan Eckel, *Geist der Zeit: Deutsche Geisteswissenschaften seit 1870*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008; Rens Bod, *De Vergeten Wetenschappen*, Prometheus, 2010, translated as *A New History of the Humanities*, Oxford University Press, 2013; James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, 2014. See also the journal *History of Humanities*.

## Challenge 1: The Problem of Demarcation

The first question to get to grips with is: what are the humanities? While most of us will have an intuitive idea of what the humanities are, we are often left empty-handed if we are asked for a definition or for criteria for demarcation. We thus need to further specify our question by asking whether the humanities are characterized by their objects or by their methods. A well-known definition by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) focuses on the objects of the humanities: according to Dilthey the humanities are *the disciplines that study the products of the human mind*, such as texts, art, language, music and theater.<sup>3</sup> However, this 19<sup>th</sup>-century definition does not do justice to new humanities fields such as environmental humanities and medical humanities whose objects are the ecosystem and health respectively. Evidently, the humanities not only study the products of the human mind, but also nature and life. Another well-known definition takes the humanities as *the disciplines that study human culture*,<sup>4</sup> but such a definition would also include the social sciences such as sociology, economics and political science. Perhaps we might better attempt to define the humanities by its method(s), such as the hermeneutic method, the grammatical method, the stemmatological method and the source-critical method.<sup>5</sup>

If we follow this path, we find that these methods are used not only by “core humanities” disciplines, such as history, philology, linguistics and art history, but also by (sub)disciplines that are often seen as boundary cases. For example, the hermeneutic method is used in cultural psychology and historical sociology.<sup>6</sup> The source-critical method is employed in forensic science, legal studies and governmental studies as a tool for distinguishing false from reliable sources.<sup>7</sup> The stemmatological method (from stemmatic philology) has been appropriated by the field of cladistics which uses history trees for classifications based on common ancestry, and the grammatical method is used in computational linguistics to create natural language processing systems.<sup>8</sup>

While this expansion of humanistic methods to other fields may serve as an argument for the relevance of the humanities, these methods alone do still not provide us with a demarcation criterion for the humanities. Unless we go for a definition that is more inclusive than attempted before and that *includes all fields that incorporate humanistic methods* but no more than that. According to this view, fields employing humanistic approaches are partly

---

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften: Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte*, 1883, reprinted by Teubner 1959. Note that the word “mind” may not be exactly equivalent to the German word “Geist” used by Dilthey, but for the moment we will leave this as is.

<sup>4</sup> See Rens Bod and Julia Kursell, “Introduction: The Humanities and the Sciences”, *Isis*, 106(2), 2015, pp. 337-440.

<sup>5</sup> For these and other methods, see Bod, *ibidem*, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> For historical overviews of the social sciences, see Roger Smith, *The Norton History of the Human Sciences*, Norton, 1997; Scott Gordon, *The History and Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction*, Routledge, 1993; Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross, *The Cambridge History of Science, Vol. 7, The Modern Social Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Fredrik Bertilsson, “Source Criticism as a Technology of Government in the Swedish Psychological Defence: The Impact of Humanistic Knowledge on Contemporary Security Policy”, *Humanities*, 10(1), 2021, 13. See also Charles Bazerman, *The Informed Writer: Using Sources in the Disciplines*, Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Rens Bod, “A Comparative Framework for Studying the Histories of the Humanities and Science”, *Isis*, 106(2), 2015, pp. 367-377.

humanistic, just as some of the core humanities disciplines can be viewed as partly scientific when they use methods from the exact sciences, such as archeology and linguistics. In this way, our definition goes beyond the core disciplines of the humanities and acknowledges that there is a set of methods that originate (or “begin”, if one prefers<sup>9</sup>) in the study of the products of the human mind but that have also profoundly shaped subdisciplines from the social sciences, life sciences and exact sciences.

Thus we can extend Dilthey’s definition by stating that *the humanities are the disciplines that use methods that originate in the study of the products of the human mind*. This way we include both the core humanities disciplines and the newer fields, such as environmental and medical humanities, as well as fields that are partly humanistic because they use methods transferred from the studies of the products of the human mind. Our definition is inclusive in that it does not exclude any discipline that could possibly be humanistic with regard to methodology. On the other hand, the definition implies that methods that have a strong “scientific flavor” but that come from a field that studies the productions of the human mind – such as the method of topic modeling used in digital humanities and computational linguistics – are also attributed to the humanities. As a consequence the distinction between the humanities and the sciences may get blurred, at least for some (sub)disciplines. Yet we believe that it is historically important to derive where methods start or come from, whatever flavor they have. And if we can ascertain that a method originates both in the study of the products of the human mind and in the study of nature, then a discipline using that method is part of both the humanities and the sciences.

All in all this leads to my first maxim:

**Maxim 1:** *Be inclusive with respect to the boundaries of the humanities: fields outside the core humanistic disciplines that employ methods that originate or begin in the study of the expressions of the human mind are part of the history of the humanities.*

## **Challenge 2: The Problem of Anachronism**

My solution to the demarcation problem heavily relies on current disciplinary categories. What about fields before the 1800s when the term “humanities” did not exist? This touches upon one of the central themes in intellectual history, namely the issue of anachronism. That is, how can we write about a concept in a certain period if that concept did not exist in that period?<sup>10</sup> For example, can we use the term “humanities” to designate scholarly practices before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or would this result in a misleading form of anachronism?<sup>11</sup> If we

---

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on the distinction between origin and beginning, see Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, Columbia University Press, 1985. We will not go into this discussion here, and use the two terms interchangeably.

<sup>10</sup> For a typology of anachronisms, see Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, *History and theory*, 8(1), 1969, pp. 3-53. For a more recent overview, see Carlos Spoerhase, “Zwischen den Zeiten: Anachronismus und Präsentismus in der Methodologie der historischen Wissenschaften”, *Scientia Poetica*, 8, 2004, pp. 169-240.

<sup>11</sup> The anachronistic use of the term humanities has been noted by several authors, including Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Limitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*, Yale University Press, 1982, p. 30; Robert

squeeze past intellectual activities into a straightjacket of present-day expressions, we run the risk of descending into an undesirable kind of presentism in which the past is interpreted in terms of current concepts and perspectives.<sup>12</sup> So what do we gain if we anachronistically assign precursors of the humanities to the “humanities”? According to Nicholas Jardine, anachronisms are not necessarily harmful or misleading. The application of modern disciplinary categories to past practices can result in an enlightening use of anachronism.<sup>13</sup> In this essay, I will go one step further and argue that there are cases for which the application of modern categories to past practices is not only enlightening but even a prerequisite for a proper understanding of the history of the humanities. Without an anachronistic application of modern disciplinary categories to the past we may run the risk of overlooking how humanistic concepts and methods came into being. And we may even run the risk of giving credit where credit is *not* due.

Take philology, in particular the work by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century philologist Karl Lachmann (1793-1851) who has been referred to as “one of the most important figures in the development of modern European theory and practice of textual editions.”<sup>14</sup> Lachmann’s major contribution is to the field of stemmatic philology for which he (further) developed the notion of a genealogical tree – a stemma – that represents the relations between variants of an original text so as to ascertain which texts have been copied from which other ones. This allowed Lachmann to derive a series of mechanical rules that can reconstruct the archetype from extant copies.<sup>15</sup> Lachmann’s method had an unprecedented success in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century humanities: he succeeded in reconstructing dozens of Latin, Greek and medieval works, the accuracy of which were unprecedented.

As successful as his method was, most concepts and techniques proposed by Lachmann had already been in use for decades and in some cases for centuries. Examples are the concept of archetype, genealogical tree, and some of the rules for reconstructing the original text.<sup>16</sup> For example, the rule known as *eliminatio codicum descriptorum*, which regulates the elimination of sources that entirely depend on earlier sources, was already introduced as early as in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the Italian humanist Angelo Poliziano.<sup>17</sup> Subsequent philologists elaborated on Poliziano’s work, including Desiderius Erasmus and Joseph Scaliger in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Jean Mabillon in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Richard Bentley in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The major addition by Lachmann was that he integrated the previous methods and techniques into a systematic whole.

---

Proctor, *Defining the Humanities: How Rediscovering a Tradition Can Improve our Schools*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 8; Bod, *ibidem*, 2013, pp. 8-11. Nevertheless these authors use the term humanities to describe past activities in a period when the term was not used by historical actors.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion, see David Hull, “In defense of presentism”, *History and theory*, 18, 1979, pp. 1-15.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Jardine, “Uses and Abuses of Anachronism in the History of the Sciences”, *History of Science*, 38, 2000, pp. 251-270.

<sup>14</sup> Glenn Most, “Karl Lachmann (1793-1851): Reconstructing the Transmission of a Classical Latin Author”, *History of Humanities*, 4(2), 2019, pp. 269-273[269].

<sup>15</sup> For a translation of Lachmann’s original publication, see Glenn Most, “Translation of the Introduction of Caroli Lachmanni in T. Lucretii Cari De Rerum Natura Libros Commentarius”, *History of Humanities* 4(2), 2019, pp. 275-286.

<sup>16</sup> For a critical view on Lachmann, see Sebastiano Timpanaro, *The Genesis of Lachmann’s Method*, translated and edited by Glenn W. Most, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> See Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text*, Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 56.

Clearly we cannot understand the development of stemmatic philology if we leave out its predecessors. And since philology is part of the humanities, it follows that we can neither understand the development of the humanities if we do not face the fact that several modern humanistic concepts and methods were already in existence in premodern disciplines.

Similar stories can be told for other disciplines too. Take the art-historical method of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) whose work has shaped generations of art historians. Wölfflin proposed to analyze paintings in terms of hierarchically layered structures in which the smallest elements are combined so as to create ever greater parts that make up a coherent organization of the whole art work.<sup>18</sup> Similar to Lachmann's stemmatology, Wölfflin's art-historical method made use of the work of predecessors, for example Leon Battista Alberti's 15<sup>th</sup>-century concept of *compositio*, which also proposed a hierarchical analysis in describing the composition of a painting.<sup>19</sup> And Alberti, in turn, is believed to have built on rhetorical methods that go back to Cicero: a text is analyzed by hierarchically dividing it up into paragraphs, sentences, clauses and constituents all the way down to words.<sup>20</sup> This part-whole analysis turned out to be fertile in many fields, from linguistic, art-historical, musicological to poetical analysis. And many of these methods go back to ancient rhetoric that was intensively studied by early modern humanists. Thus as with philology, for a proper understanding of the history of modern art history, we must take into consideration early modern and even ancient concepts and methods.

It is almost nowhere that the history of the humanities of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries can be considered in isolation from the early modern period. This does not mean that there are no breaks in the humanities during the important transition from the early modern to the modern period. What is new in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, is the institutional embedding of disciplines into universities, together with specialized journals, conferences, educational curricula and specialized professorial chairs. A major pedagogical innovation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the research seminar which was developed at the University of Berlin. And earlier, Leopold von Ranke had started his *historische Übungen* ("historical exercises), which ran from 1825 to 1870, serving as a model for history teaching in many other universities.<sup>21</sup> Ranke's exercises were held in his private library, such that students could consult the vast collection of manuscripts he had acquired.<sup>22</sup> As innovative as Ranke's *Übungen* and the research seminars were at the time, there are still significant precursors. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Leiden professor Joseph Scaliger organized research meetings with his students in his private home, where he trained them in the finesses of philology and chronology with his

---

<sup>18</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, Bruckmann, 1915.

<sup>19</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *De pictura*, 1435.

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion in Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition 1350-1450*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 130.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Herman Paul (ed), *How to Be a Historian: Scholarly Personae in Historical Studies, 1800-2000*, Manchester University Press, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, "Leopold Von Ranke (1795–1886): Criticizing an Early Modern Historian," *History of Humanities*, 4(2), 2019, pp. 257–262.

own library at hand.<sup>23</sup> Of course, the institutional, social and intellectual contexts of Scaliger's research meetings differ greatly from those of Ranke's, but the notion of seminary meetings is older than the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This is not to say that studies in the history of the humanities must always go back to the earliest mention of a particular concept. But we have to face the fact that many modern humanistic concepts and methods already existed in premodern disciplines. For these cases the anachronistic application of present-day concepts to past intellectual activities is enlightening as well as necessary for understanding their history. This brings me to my second maxim:

**Maxim 2:** *Be inclusive with respect to time: premodern practices need to be taken into account if we want to understand the history of modern concepts and methods in the humanities.*

### **Challenge 3: The Problem of Eurocentrism (and Ethnocentrism)**

It is often taken for granted that the humanities start in the west. Almost all monographs that present an overview of the history of the humanities (be it bird's-eye or in-depth) either begin with classical Greece or with the European *artes liberales* (i.e. the *trivium* thereof). They usually continue with the first humanistic curriculum of the *studia humanitatis* in renaissance Italy, and they reach a pinnacle with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German and other European universities of which the humanities programs spread over the rest of the world.<sup>24</sup>

These monographs thus place the history of the humanities within an exclusively European framework, as if there is no other history than a western one. To some extent, the historiography of the humanities is even more eurocentric than the historiography of science. Long-term histories of science at least include the Islamic contributions, and often more.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the long-term historiography of the humanities has almost entirely remained European. This is surprising since it is rather uncontroversial that the European humanities incorporated insights from the Islamic disciplines such as philosophy, history and linguistics. Well-known examples are the philosophical works of Averroes and Avicenna, the historical work of Ibn Khaldun, and the linguistic work of Sibawayh.

---

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols., Oxford University Press, 1983, 1993. See also Dirk van Miert, *The Emancipation of Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1590-1670*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> See Proctor, *ibidem*, 1998, ch. 1-4; Michiel Leezenberg and Gerard de Vries, *History and Philosophy of the Humanities*, Amsterdam University Press, 2019; Søren Kjølrup, *Humanities Geisteswissenschaftliche Sciences humaines: Eine Einführung*, Springer, 2001. Eric Adler, *The Battle of the Classics: How a Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Save the Humanities*, Oxford University Press, 2020, ch. 2. An exception is Bod, *ibidem*, 2013. Global approaches are used more often in histories of single humanities disciplines, such as Esa Itkonen, *Universal History of Linguistics*, John Benjamins, 1991; Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin Elman and Ku-ming Chang (eds), *World Philology*, Harvard University Press, 2015; Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History*, Cambridge University Press, 2011; Christopher Wood, *A History of Art History*, Princeton University Press, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. James McClellan and Harold Dorn, *Science and Technology in World History: An Introduction*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999; Patricia Fara, *Science: A Four Thousand Year History*, Oxford University Press, 2009; H. Floris Cohen, *How Modern Science Came into the World*, Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

Perhaps the strongest Islamic influence on the European humanities is found in the curriculum of the *studia humanitatis* itself. This curriculum is commonly attributed to the 14<sup>th</sup>-century humanist Coluccio Salutati who purportedly structured the *studia humanitatis* into five disciplines: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy.<sup>26</sup> However, these five disciplines exactly correspond to the disciplines of the 9<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic curriculum known as the *studia adabyia* (or *adab* disciplines).<sup>27</sup> We do not know whether Salutati was aware of the *studia adabyia*,<sup>28</sup> and we neither know whether the two *studia*'s rely on an even older curriculum. Cicero used the term *studia humanitatis* in his *Pro Archia* but he meant something different by it, as he mentioned geometry, music, poetry and dialectic as the disciplines in which young boys had to be formed.<sup>29</sup> As far as we know, the *studia adabyia* is the oldest curriculum that contains the famous five disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. Thus a widely acclaimed conception of the European humanities was already in existence in the Islamic humanities five centuries earlier, and even if both curricula go back to an older one (which is not currently known), the Islamic *studia adabyia* forms the missing link.

The absence of any mention of the *studia adabyia* in the historiography of the humanities is an example of a more serious pattern: not only are the Islamic humanities neglected in the historiography of the humanities, also the Chinese, Indian, African, pre-Columbian and Polynesian humanities are conspicuous by their absence. A fascinating example is provided by the Indian linguist Panini (ca. 500 BCE) who developed a highly complex grammar of Sanskrit consisting of almost 4000 rules for all aspects of language – from phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics to pragmatics.<sup>30</sup> According to the historian of linguistics, Paul Kiparsky, “modern linguistics acknowledges it as the most complete generative grammar of any language yet written, and continues to adopt technical ideas from it”.<sup>31</sup> It took about a millennium before Panini's work started to circulate outside India, first to China (by Buddhist monks in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE),<sup>32</sup> next to the Islamic world (by Al-Biruni who wrote a chapter on Panini's grammar in his *Kitab al-Hind* in the 11<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>33</sup> and much later to Europe (where it was taken up by 19<sup>th</sup>-century linguists such as Franz Bopp and 20<sup>th</sup>-century linguists like Leonard Bloomfield and Noam Chomsky).<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Coluccio Salutati, *Epistolario* IV, edited by Francesco Novati, Fonti per la storia d'Italia pubblicate dall'Istituto Storico Italiano, 1891-1911, p. 216.

<sup>27</sup> See George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, Edinburgh University Press, 1990; Sonja Brentjes, *Teaching and Learning the Sciences in Islamicate Societies (800-1700)*, Brepols, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Even if Salutati had been aware of the *studia adabyia*, he would probably not have referred to it, since his goal, like that of so many an Italian humanist, was to revive the Roman classical world in opposition to both the Islamic and the scholastic world.

<sup>29</sup> See also the discussion in Proctor, *ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Panini, *The Ashtadhyayi*, translated into English by Srisa Chandra Vasu, Nabu Press 2011 (reprint of 1923).

<sup>31</sup> Paul Kiparsky, “Paninian Linguistics”, *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Elsevier, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> Sally Wriggins, *Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road*, Westview Press, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, Vol. I, Trübner & Co., 1888.

<sup>34</sup> Itkonen, *ibidem*, 1991.

Panini's ideas thus circulated widely, and yet most histories of the humanities neglect his work.<sup>35</sup>

Panini's case is an example of the flowering of the humanities outside Europe. It has become clear that the humanities have flourished earlier and more intensively outside Europe, not only in India but also in China and elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> The study of art, literature, music, language and the past were practiced basically everywhere in world: from the genealogies produced on the Polynesian island of Tonga, and the historical-mythological narratives *Popol Vuh* from the Maya civilization, to the famous manuscripts from Timbuktu that include historical, logical, philological and musicological studies. The history of humanities practices from different parts of the world can be studied in their own right, but in order to understand how humanistic concepts and ideas move across regions (as we have seen with Panini's case), these practices should also be studied in terms of their circulation. Instead of a *monocentric* approach to the history of the humanities, we thus need a *polycentric* perspective where in principle every place can be viewed as a center.<sup>37</sup> A polycentric approach treats the histories of the humanities from different places on a par; it studies these histories both from the perspective of each place itself as well as from the perspective of any other place to which knowledge transfer may have taken place. In this way we can explore how ideas, concepts, metaphors, methods, virtues and practices – which we have called “cognitive goods” elsewhere – flowed from one place to the other, if at all (be it from Timbuktu, Xian, Amsterdam or Totoncapán).<sup>38</sup>

Hence my third maxim:

**Maxim 3:** *Be polycentric with respect to space: aim for a history of the humanities which treats the humanities from different places in the world on a par.*

#### **Challenge 4: The Problem of Incommensurability**

My solution to the problem of eurocentrism and ethnocentrism triggers another challenge: the problem of incommensurable concepts. How can we compare humanities disciplines from different parts of the world when they use words or concepts that diverge so greatly that any comparison gets muddled by confusions about their cultural contexts?<sup>39</sup> I will argue that

---

<sup>35</sup> Studies on the history of western linguistics that mention Panini, typically underexpose his work. In Pieter Seuren, *Western Linguistics: An Historical Introduction*, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, only one sentence is dedicated to Panini's work, and only with regard to his influence on Leonard Bloomfield (p. 191).

<sup>36</sup> See chapter 1 in Bod, *ibidem*, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> See Rens Bod, *Een wereld vol patronen: De geschiedenis van kennis* (“A World of Patterns: The History of Knowledge”), Prometheus, 2019, pp. 19-23.

<sup>38</sup> The mass term cognitive good was introduced in Rens Bod, Jeroen van Dongen, Sjang ten Hagen, Bart Karstens and Emma Mojet, “The flow of cognitive goods: A historiographical framework for the study of epistemic transfer”, *Isis*, 110(3), 2019, pp. 483-496.

<sup>39</sup> Note that incommensurable concepts may not only occur between different cultures, but also between different periods within a single culture. In maxim 2 on anachronism I assume that concepts are at least mutually commensurable. In case they are not, I must point to maxim 4 below. For the notion of incommensurability, see Ludwik Fleck, “Zur Krise der ‘Wirklichkeit’”, *Die Naturwissenschaften*, 17, 1929, pp. 425–430. For “comparing the incomparable”, see Marcel Detienne, *Comparer l'incomparable*, Points, 2009.

despite the existence of incommensurable concepts, we can often discern higher-level intercultural concepts that allow for meaningful comparison (of similarities as well as of differences). Intercultural or universal concepts have been heavily criticized by anthropologists,<sup>40</sup> but in fields such as comparative literature or comparative history the goal is to search for levels of analysis that involve comparable concepts. I will argue that two candidates for intercultural concepts in the history of the humanities are (1) the notion of *rule/pattern*, and (2) the notion of *principle*.<sup>41</sup> In all cultures, humans seem to have searched for patterns in their surrounding world (natural and cultural), and for underlying principles that try to explain these rules or patterns.<sup>42</sup>

Take the ancient Chinese concept of *qi* (氣) which in English is translated alternatively with “vital force”, “material energy”, “life force”, “energy flow”, and even with “air”.<sup>43</sup> The concept plays a fundamental role in the history of Chinese medicine as well as in other fields.<sup>44</sup> In Chinese art theory *qi* is used in Xie He’s seminal text “Classification of Painters” (*Gu huapin lu*) from the 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE.<sup>45</sup> According to Xie He, a prerequisite of a good painting is that it has a resonance of *qi*. This concept is not commensurable with any of the Greek or Roman concepts on good art. In the few art-theoretical works that have survived from European antiquity, such as (part of) Pliny’s “Natural History” (*Naturalis historia*), we find descriptions of how to achieve an illusion of reality, but nowhere in Pliny or elsewhere do we find a concept that comes anywhere close to vital force or energy flow. Perhaps the closest comes Pliny’s discussion of the capacity to depict the “spirit” of (a portrait) of Alexander the Great by the painter Apelles.<sup>46</sup> But any comparison between the temperamental notion of “spirit” with the mystic notion of *qi* becomes close to meaningless.

And yet, there are other levels of analysis that do allow for meaningful comparison of these art-theoretical works, for instance at the level of the concept of *rule*. We find this concept not only in Pliny and Xie He, but also in the Indian art-theoretical text “Six Limbs” (*Sadanga*).<sup>47</sup> The rules in these texts describe regularities for bodily proportions, for different forms of (parallel and geometric) perspective and for foreshortening. These rules are specified to such an extent that we can precisely delineate both their commonalities and differences.

---

<sup>40</sup> The anthropologist Mary Douglas referred to her colleagues’ obsession with exceptions to intercultural concepts (“this does not apply to my tribe”) as “Bongo-bongo-ism”, see Paul Richards, *Mary Tew Douglas (1921–2007)*, *American Anthropologist*, 110(3), 2008, pp. 407–410. For a plea for making comparisons across cultures, see Mineke Schipper, *Imagining Insiders: Africa and the Question of Belonging*, Cassell, 1999.

<sup>41</sup> See also Bod, *ibidem*, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> For the search of patterns and principles in different cultures, see e.g. Gary Tomlinson, *Culture and the Course of Human Evolution*, University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 4-18. See also Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973, p. 89. For a history of patterns and principles across knowledge disciplines, see Rens Bod, *Een wereld vol patronen: De geschiedenis van kennis* (“A World of Patterns: The History of Knowledge”), Prometheus, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> For a recent discussion on the problem of translation of such concepts, see Annemarie Mol and John Law (eds), *On Other Terms: Interfering in Social Science English*, Special issue *The Sociological Review Monographs Series*, March 2020.

<sup>44</sup> See Yu Huan Zhang and Ken Rose, *A brief history of qi*, Paradigm Publications, 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Texts by the Painter-Critics, from the Han through the Ch’ing Dynasties*, Dover Publications, 1936, reprinted in 2005, p. 219.

<sup>46</sup> Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, 35.79-97.

<sup>47</sup> Prithvi Agrawala, *On the Sadanga Canons of Painting*, Prithvi Prakashan, 1981.

The concept of rule is of course also widespread in linguistics where a grammar describes the regularities of word forms and word orders. Although grammars have served different purposes in different regions and periods, the grammatical rules themselves are well comparable – from the so-called *context-sensitive* rules used in Panini’s grammar to the *dependency* rules used in Sibawayh’s grammar from the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>48</sup> The same holds for philology where various rules for reconstructing the original text from extant copies have been developed, both in early modern Europe and in Ming-Qing China. And in the field of history writing, historians all over the world have tried to formulate a variety of rules for assessing the reliability of a historical document – such as the *isnad* method in the Islamic world and the method of historical source-criticism in Europe.<sup>49</sup>

Also the *principles* underlying the various rules can be compared. In rhetoric and logic, the search for general principles of reasoning can be found in different places. In both the Chinese *Mohist Canons* and Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* we find formulations of the well-known *laws of non-contradiction* and *excluded middle* that can be properly compared.<sup>50</sup> These “laws” are taken as the criteria to which all reasoning patterns must comply. And in musicology we find a search for different harmonic principles underlying the regularities in consonant intervals (in particular the tonic, octave and fifth) both in Greece (Pythagoras, Aristoxenus), India (Bharata Muni) and China (Liu An).

Thus the problem of incommensurable concepts should be rephrased as the *problem of finding a proper level of analysis*, such as the level of rule, pattern or principle. Not everything can be meaningfully compared, but once we start searching for comparative levels of historical analysis across cultures then the door is opened to an immense enrichment of the history of the humanities.<sup>51</sup>

**Maxim 4:** *Not everything can be compared directly, but there are commensurable levels of analysis – such as rules, patterns and principles – that are comparable across places.*

## General Discussion

### Other solutions to the four challenges

The solutions to the four challenges given in this essay represent only one end of the spectrum. My choices were strongly inclusive. Less inclusive or even exclusive choices are also possible. The other end of the spectrum would correspond, for example, to:

---

<sup>48</sup> See Itkonen, *ibidem*, 1991 for a comparison of these rules.

<sup>49</sup> For a comparison of the Islamic *isnad* method with the European source-critical method, see Rens Bod, “How to Open Pandora’s Box: A Tractable Notion of the History of Knowledge”, *Journal for the History of Knowledge*, 1(1), 2020.

<sup>50</sup> See Jialong Zhang and Fenrong Liu, “Some Thoughts on Mohist Logic”, in Johan van Benthem, Shier Ju and Frank Veltman (eds.), *A Meeting of the Minds: Proceedings of the Workshop on Logic, Rationality and Interaction*, College Publications, 2007, pp. 85-102.

<sup>51</sup> This is forcefully defended in Chris Lorenz, “Comparative Historiography: Problems and Perspectives”, *History and Theory*, 38(1), 1999, pp. 25-39. See also Benjamin Kedar (ed.), *Explorations of Comparative History*, The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2009. For an illustration of comparison with respect to the humanities, see Devin Griffiths, “The Comparative Method and the History of the Modern Humanities”, *History of Humanities*, 2(2), 2017, pp. 473-505.

Challenge 1 (Demarcation): Only disciplines that study the products of the human mind should be included.

Challenge 2 (Anachronism): The history of the humanities should be limited to the period in which “humanities” existed as a term so as to avoid anachronism.

Challenge 3 (Eurocentrism): The history of the humanities should be limited to those disciplines that were established as humanities disciplines in the west.

Challenge 4 (Incommensurability): Humanities disciplines can only be compared if they use the same concepts.

Some of these exclusive choices may seem reasonable alternatives to the inclusive ones, but if they are applied methodically they reduce the history of the humanities not only to the period in which the term humanities is actually used, but they also reduce the history of the humanities to the Anglophone world only. This is because the terms used in other languages and regions, such as “Geisteswissenschaften” in German, are not exactly translatable with “humanities”.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, since the English notion of humanities was introduced only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the history of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “humanities” in the Anglophone world would have to be excluded (for reasons of anachronism). The exclusive choices above would thus lead to an unparalleled barrenness and parochialism. This being said, there may be solutions that lie between the inclusive and exclusive ones. But whatever choices we make, they need to be carefully argued for.

**Other challenges: forgotten scholars, non-academic humanities and colonial humanities**

Our four challenges are far from exhaustive, even though they are constitutive for the history of humanities as a field. An important challenge we have not discussed so far is the problem of forgotten or disregarded scholars, in particular women scholars.

While women scholars have played for centuries a marginal role compared to male scholars, their contributions have been unjustly downplayed. One of the earliest women scholars, the Chinese historian Ban Zhao (45-116 CE), has only been accorded the honor of finishing the “Book of Han” (*Hanshu*) where her brother Ban Gu allegedly left off. But it has turned out that her share was as important as her brother’s.<sup>53</sup> The Byzantine historian Anna Comnena, author of the famous *Alexiad*, received a reputation of having produced a “strongly colored” history, as if her 12<sup>th</sup>-century male colleagues were not writing colored history.<sup>54</sup> And take the many early modern women philologists, such as Isotta Nogarola, Alessandra Scala, and Cornelia Vossius, who had little opportunity to develop their exceptional talent. Their fate was either seclusion or marriage; other paths would have met with scorn.<sup>55</sup> The philologists Anne Dacier and Anna Maria van Schurman may seem exceptions to this pattern, but an academic career was ruled out for them too. There is now a revival of interest in the history of women scholars from Europe and China as well as from Africa, such as the 19<sup>th</sup>-

---

<sup>52</sup> For example, until ca. 1950, the Geisteswissenschaften included the social sciences, whilst this was not the case for the humanities.

<sup>53</sup> Anthony Clark, *Ban Gu's History of Early China*, Cambria Press, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Carolyn Connor, *Women of Byzantium*, Yale University Press, 2004.

<sup>55</sup> See Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall (eds), *Women Classical Scholars: Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 35.

century Fula scholar Nana Asma'u who wrote a stunning history of the Fulani wars: "The Journey" (*Wakar Gewaye*).<sup>56</sup>

This brings me also to the problem of the *non-academic* humanities, which deals with the works of scholars who had no humanistic training let alone academic positions. Examples include merchants writing grammars for practical, often commercial purposes such as Joan Ketelaar's first grammar of Hindustani from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>57</sup> Or non-academic historians who wrote about the history of a city, such as the *Ta'rikh al-fattash* recounting the rise and fall of Timbuktu.<sup>58</sup> Or artists and artisans who wrote handbooks with technical descriptions of the visual arts. Or musicians and actors who possessed embodied and tacit knowledge of music and theater. The latter is also relevant to the problem of oral traditions, involving for instance historical, musicological and art-theoretical knowledge that was never written down. Many of these non-academic productions in the humanities have been forgotten or even obscured.<sup>59</sup> Yet they are an essential part of the history of the humanities. Focusing on embodied and tacit knowledge shifts the attention from scholarly institutions to amateurs and practitioners in non-academic professions, including women and minorities.

The same counts for what has been referred to as the "colonial humanities": while it is increasingly recognized that European scholars took actively part in colonization and suppression, the contribution of the *colonized* scholars is still vastly understudied. Of particular interest are the joint productions of colonizing and colonized scholars, the study of which has only very recently begun.<sup>60</sup> The challenge to come to terms with the colonial heritage of the humanities is more important than ever and should be part of the history of the humanities.

### **Relation with the history of science and the history of knowledge**

To what extent do our challenges also hold for the history of science and the history of knowledge more generally? The relation between the history of the humanities and the history of science has become a vivid strand of research, in particular since the Focus section in *Isis* on this topic.<sup>61</sup> Yet rather than dealing with the constitutive challenges, most of these studies go into the entangled histories of specific humanities and science disciplines, such as between philology and biology, linguistics and computer science, or history and physics.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Jean Boyd and Beverly B. Mack (eds), *The Collected Works of Nana Asma'u, Daughter of Usman dan Fodiyo 1793–1864*, Michigan State University Press, 1997.

<sup>57</sup> Anna Pytlowany, *Ketelaar rediscovered: The first Dutch grammar of Persian and Hindustani (1698)*. LOT Publications, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> *Ta'rikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493-1599*, English translation of the original work by al Kati, edited by Christopher Wise, translated by Christopher Wise and Haba Abu Taleb, Africa World Press, 2011.

<sup>59</sup> See Han Lamers, Toon Van Hal and Sebastiaan Clercx, "How to Deal with Scholarly Forgetting in the History of the Humanities: Starting Points for Discussion", *History of Humanities*, 5(1), 2020, pp. 5-29.

<sup>60</sup> See Daniela Merolla, Michiel Leezenberg, Victoria Sear and Mark Turin, "Forum: The Rise and Decline of 'Colonial Humanities'", *History of Humanities*, 6.1, in press. See also Will Bridges, "A brief history of the inhumanities", *History of Humanities*, 4(1), 2019, pp. 1-26.

<sup>61</sup> Rens Bod and Julia Kursell (eds), "FOCUS Section: The History of Humanities and the History of Science." *Isis*, 106(2), 2015.

<sup>62</sup> See for example Josephine Musil-Gutsch, "On the Same Page: Paper Technology Practices in the Humanities and the Sciences", *History of Humanities*, 5(2), 2020, pp. 355-381. See also Sjang ten Hagen, "How 'Facts' Shaped Modern Disciplines: The Fluid Concept of Fact and the Common Origins of German Physics and Historiography", *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences*, 49(3), 2019, pp. 300-337.

We believe that the four challenges discussed in this essay are directly relevant for the history of science and the history of knowledge. The problems of demarcation, anachronism, eurocentrism and incommensurability carry over to these fields, especially to histories that go beyond single disciplines, periods or regions.<sup>63</sup> As far as our solutions and maxims are concerned, these can almost be literally applied to the history of science and knowledge. Only the maxim of demarcation is specifically geared to the humanities. But what holds for the term “humanities” also holds for the terms “science” and “knowledge”: any history must come to grips with the questions as to what fields are included, and how histories can be written across time and space.

---

<sup>63</sup> For further discussion on the foundations of the history of knowledge, see Peter Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?*, Polity Press, 2016; Sven Dupré and Geert Somsen, “Forum: What is the History of Knowledge?”, *Journal for the History of Knowledge*, 1(1), 2020; Lorraine Daston, “The History of Science and the History of Knowledge.” *KNOW*, 1(1), 2017, pp. 131–54.