

History and Philosophy of the Humanities

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An introduction

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Translation by Michiel Leezenberg

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Preface

Philosophy of science textbooks tend to restrict their attention to the natural sciences, which allegedly represent what ‘real science’ is. In some other cases, the epistemological and methodological problems of the social sciences are dealt with as well. Textbooks that cater to the needs of students in the humanities, however, are few and far between. The present book aims to fill this lacuna. It provides humanities students with the necessary means to reflect on the character of their field of study as well as on the place of the humanities in the world of science at large and their position in contemporary society and culture.

This book neither propagates a particular view on, or approach to, the humanities nor gives advice about how to conduct research. Rather, it discusses the development of the Western humanities and the diverging views that exist with regard to their tasks, character, and methods. These views – and with them the very distinction between the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities – have taken different shapes in the course of history. By not only discussing general epistemological and discipline-specific methodological questions but also paying ample attention to the historical developments that have contributed to the development of the humanities, this book hopes to be of interest to scholars in the humanities (both current and future) as well as readers primarily interested in the natural and social sciences.

The book consists of four parts. In Part One, we discuss humanism, the scientific revolution, and a number of standard views on science, including logical empiricism and critical rationalism. Several epistemological notions that are relevant for understanding the humanities are introduced, including Kant’s version of the subject-object scheme, the implications of the Duhem-Quine thesis, and the rejection of the so-called myth of the given. Finally, we discuss the historicization of the philosophical view of the sciences that occurred in the 1960s.

In Part Two, we discuss the emergence of the modern humanities. For didactic reasons, we take the periodization of Foucault’s archaeology of the human sciences as guiding; it enables us to clarify the *philosophical* developments that made the very idea of the modern humanities or ‘human sciences’ possible; to discuss how the development of the humanities was encouraged by *social* and *political* factors such as the rise of bourgeois society, nationalism, and the European colonization of large parts of the world; and to show how and why the humanities received a distinct *institutional*

position within universities. After this, we discuss how the new disciplines distinguished themselves in terms of their character, object, or methods from the ones that had already been established.

In Part Three, we present the main currents and styles of inquiry within the humanities that developed in the course of the twentieth century, together with their intellectual background: critical theory, structuralism and positivism, and the so-called practice turn that occurred after the Second World War. Two other influential currents – hermeneutics and neo-Kantianism – are already discussed in detail at the end of Part Two in the context of the questions that had emerged around 1900 concerning the character and methods of the humanities and the social sciences, in particular in the German-speaking academic world.

Finally, Part Four discusses a number of issues that have set the tone of debates in the humanities in recent decades: critiques of modernity; postcolonialism; and debates concerning gender, sexuality, and identity. In Parts Two, Three, and Four, we also review relevant developments in the social sciences that have shaped debates concerning the character and methods of the humanities or that have supplied the terms in which specific themes (for example, modernity) have been – and continue to be – discussed.

As a result of this structure, the focus of this book gradually shifts from general epistemological and methodological questions to topics specific to the humanities, and to substantial debates concerning present-day humanities research. Philosophically, the book follows two main lines. The first concerns the way in which the Kantian and Hegelian heritage deeply affected the humanities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The second concerns the so-called linguistic turn brought about by a number of twentieth-century authors who – to some extent independently of each other – reformulated questions concerning knowledge and consciousness as questions concerning language, language use, and meaning. The linguistic turn is usually associated with logical empiricism and analytical philosophy, but a similar turn also occurred among authors in the German and French traditions.

This book does not require prior philosophical knowledge. Inevitably, because of considerations of space and accessibility, some of the questions and answers discussed had to be presented in somewhat oversimplified terms. Professional philosophers may well deplore this. This textbook, however, does not aim to be a specialist philosophical exegesis but rather to present and clarify conceptual problems for a non-specialist audience. Finally, it should be noted that specific contemporary research programmes and controversial questions in the humanities are discussed purely as illustrations of abstract

or general themes in the philosophy of the humanities. To the extent that the authors have strong views concerning such questions and programmes, they have tried not to bother the reader with them: no philosophical or methodological *parti pris* should be read into these lines.

For a number of years, Dutch-language versions of his book, originally written by Michiel Leezenberg and Gerard de Vries, have been in use in several universities in the Netherlands. This English-language edition, which apart from minor details is text-identical with the third (2017) Dutch edition, was prepared by Michiel Leezenberg. The translation was copy-edited by Gioia Marini. Sigmund Bruno Schilpzand played an important role as editorial assistant. Over the years, many colleagues and students who have used previous editions of this book in class have shared their experiences and made valuable suggestions for revisions. All of them are hereby thanked.

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Gerard de Vries

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