

**Conference:**

**What is it to be human?**

**On the humanities and practical self-understanding**

April 19-20 2016, Hotel Mitland, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Keynote speakers: Jan Assmann (Heidelberg), Carola Dietze (Gießen), Denis Noble (Oxford University) (to be confirmed), Onora O'Neill (Cambridge University), Helen Small (Oxford University), Martin Stokhof (Amsterdam), Kenneth Westphal (Istanbul)

The future of the humanities is regularly questioned. What should the place and function of the humanities be within the university and in the world outside the university? What distinguishes them from the social sciences and the natural sciences? What kind of knowledge do they offer us? The aim of the conference is to explore one specific answer to these questions: the humanities are important because they contribute to our practical self-understanding. By 'practical self-understanding' we refer to the reflective capacity of human beings to integrate the diverse ways in which we can think about ourselves into a perspective that is able to offer us meaningful orientation and normative guidance in our lives and in the world.

Human beings constitute the research subject of many different disciplines. The natural sciences study the human body and the physical basis of human behavior and mental activity. The social sciences identify regularities in individual and social behavior. The humanities are characteristically understood as those disciplines that study human beings in their linguistic, artistic, historical, and religious expressions and manifestations. In addition, there are normative disciplines like ethics and law that see human beings as agents with responsibility or dignity. How do these different perspectives relate to each other? Can we bring this diversity into a consistent whole? If not, how else should we deal with it?

In this conference, we will investigate how these diverse perspectives on what it means to be human interact with each other, and ask which role the humanities could play in the integration of these diverse perspectives, in order to develop forms of practical self-understanding. Researchers and scholars from a variety of disciplines are invited to reflect on this theme: scholars from the whole spectrum of humanistic disciplines, as well as social scientists and natural scientists who are interested in these questions.

## Call for abstracts

Abstracts prepared for anonymous review (up to 300 words, excluding title, references, up to five key words, and, if applicable, preferred panel) should be sent as an attachment to [practical.selfunderstanding@gmail.com](mailto:practical.selfunderstanding@gmail.com). Please mention your name, affiliation and discipline in your email. The deadline for abstract submission is February 1st, 2016. Topics may include – but are not limited to – the following four panels:

### **1. The humanities and the natural sciences: interpretations of the human being**

Natural sciences like evolutionary biology, genetics and neuroscience, but also recent debates in psychiatry provide powerful paradigms for the interpretation of human nature. How can the humanities with their own theoretical and methodological resources make a contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of those paradigms?

### **2. Cultural and aesthetic expressions as manifestations of practical self-understanding**

The interpretation of cultural articulations of human beings in history, art, literature and religion is usually considered as the ‘core business’ of the humanities. A work of art is understood to reflect the way in which the artist as well as his public orient themselves in the existing world. Can these orientations be exposed and play a role as forms of practical self-understanding?

### **3. Normative conceptions of the human being**

There seems to be a consensus that normative conceptions of the human being have no place in fields like economics, education, psychiatry, anthropology, and evolutionary biology. In an implicit way, however, normative views of human nature might play an important role in these fields. Is a more comprehensive theory of the human being needed and how would it look like?

### **4. General questions**

We also welcome approaches that investigate general questions related to the conference theme. How, if at all, can these various approaches on the human being be brought together in order to have a picture of the relations between them? Is a conception of practical self-understanding possible and necessary and should it have a central role for the humanities?

A programme committee will review the abstracts. Notification of decisions will be given by early February. Thereafter, the conference opens for registration. For more information about the conference please visit <http://selfunderstanding.sites.uu.nl/>.

The conference is organized by the research group ‘What Can the Humanities Contribute to Our Practical Self-Understanding?’ run jointly by Utrecht University, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Tilburg University, and Leiden University, led by Prof. Marcus Düwell and financed by The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).