

## What Is Intellectual Quality in the Humanities? Some Guidelines.

### *Preface*

These guidelines are the result of discussion conducted at a small workshop funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and held in Hannover, Germany, September 10 to 11, 2014. Participants included humanists and social scientists from a range of fields (philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, philology and literary studies, anthropology, and cultural studies as well as two biologists), various countries (including China, France, Germany, India, Israel, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States), and at different stages of their careers (some just starting out, others more established). The aim of the workshop was to articulate guidelines for assessing intellectual quality in the humanities that could be put to practical use in the evaluation of grant proposals, fellowship applications, and prize nominations. The guidelines should be clear and crisp enough to offer genuine aids to judgment, but they should steer a course between the Scylla of mechanized procedures that depend on proxy indicators (e.g. citations or the amount of grant money previously awarded) and the Charybdis of appeals to ineffable connoisseurship (e.g. "I-know-it-when-I-see-it" pronouncements).

Several factors prompted this initiative: the transformation of evaluation procedures, especially in the context of international rankings, in the direction of ever more emphasis on quantified proxy indicators such as journal impact factors or citation indices (e. g. see the Leiden Manifesto on the Use of S & T Indicators) and ever less reliance on expert judgment based on reading the work in question; increasing pressure from both public and private funders of research to provide more concrete results (preferably practical in the sense of being marketable) in less time, leading to fewer risks taken in open-ended research; and the increased economization of all aspects of life, which has challenged the legitimacy of spheres of endeavor, such as scholarship and the sciences, that have advanced values beyond efficiency and productivity. The sciences are also subject to these pressures and their deforming impact on the quality of research, but the humanities have proven especially vulnerable.

These guidelines are exactly that: guidelines, not a rulebook or a checklist or a catalogue. Mindful of the historical and cultural diversity of the humanities (which an attempt to translate the term even into other European languages immediately makes clear), we do not imagine that all criteria will apply equally to all humanistic disciplines, let alone to newly emerging activities such as the digital humanities, the environmental, or medical humanities; in most cases, probably only some will apply. Nor are these criteria comprehensive or static: in the humanities as in the sciences, standards of intellectual quality are the product of history and are still evolving. Although some features may well distinguish at least some humanities from at least some sciences, such as cultural rootedness and the cultivation of a personal perspective, there is considerable overlap in some core criteria. The guidelines attempt to make clear where these areas of convergence and divergence lie. Their envisioned use lies in the assessment of individuals or collectives of scholars, not institutions. Finally, these guidelines are meant to orient judgment, not replace it.

## **Guidelines**

1. Scholarly solidity: All good work in the humanities (and the sciences) should meet the standards of clarity in expression, consistency and rigor in argument, familiarity with the relevant sources, adequacy of the evidence to support claims made, thoroughness and fairness in the treatment of existing literature on the topic, honesty and civility in the consideration of rival views, care in quotation and citation, mastery of the methods (and languages) necessary to do justice to the topic, fidelity to the sources, and the coherence of the project as a whole. These constitute the backbone of solid research and provide the necessary but not sufficient conditions for intellectual quality.

2. Intellectual significance: Is the problem significant and can the researcher explain why, preferably in terms that make sense also to scholars outside that specialty? Novelty is neither necessary nor sufficient to prove significance: some significant research returns to problems that have preoccupied scholars in a discipline since its inception; novelty for its own sake degenerates into eccentricity. There are many possible dimensions of significance, but almost all of them point beyond the problem at hand: a truly significant problem promises insights that others can build on, the more broadly the better. In some fields, the others in question may be the general public as well as other scholars. Because of both their subject matter and their interpretative standpoint, the humanities can and do change minds about meaning and values (e.g. in works of history, theater productions, or museum exhibitions).

3. Critical stance: Criticism in the humanities proceeds at many levels: most obviously and superficially, criticism of the claims and interpretations of other scholars, but also criticism of methods and sources, of prevailing assumptions, of forms of argument, and of the topics that dominate research. Criticism that spots errors is useful; criticism that exposes heretofore unsuspected limitations, invaluable. At its best, the latter form of criticism opens new vistas for research, either supplementing what is already known or transforming it. In contrast to criticism of errors, which subtracts what has been shown to be faulty, criticism of limitations adds a new way of understanding. In many realms of intellectual endeavor, diagnosis of the cause of an ailment does not *in se* lead to a therapy. But in the criticism of limitations, knowledge of the cause (e.g. ideological reasons for neglecting a topic or an approach) usually points the way to the cure. In some cases, the criticism of limitations can be transformative, as when a work of philosophy or literature widens the circle of persons – serfs, slaves, women -- to whom full political and human rights are due. The critical stance plays an especially important role in those disciplines centered upon a canon of texts, such as philosophy and literary studies. Deeper understanding in these fields comes less from new discoveries than from new interpretations made possible by criticism.

4. Perspectival suppleness: This is closely related to the critical stance, since both involve conscious distancing from the assumptions that come most naturally to scholars embedded in a particular disciplinary, cultural, and historical context. The effect of both criticism and perspectival suppleness is decentering: the cautions against anachronism in history and against ethnocentrism in anthropology are examples of such deliberate decentering. In contrast to criticism, however, perspectival suppleness is practiced with the aim of understanding rather than transcending a particular perspective: the goal is

not to achieve the view from nowhere but rather the view from here, there, and everywhere. It respects the specificity of context and the rootedness of a way of experiencing the world in a time, a place, a language, a history, and an identity. Perspectival suppleness may have the effect of increasing rather than decreasing ambiguity (e.g. when a work of art or literature created under conditions of censorship deliberately permits readings from multiple perspectives). Because the humanities are a repository of cultural memory, the ability to inhabit perspectives from the past and make them comprehensible (but not necessarily palatable) to the present is an important part of the mission and justification of the humanities.

5. Originality: This is *a*, not *the* criterion of intellectual quality in the humanities, although it is the one probably most emphasized in current North American and European discussions of evaluation. Other traditions may find the preservation of continuity (e.g. in commentary lineages of canonical texts) at least as valuable. Even within those humanistic traditions that do prize originality, the term covers a multitude of meanings: uncovering new and significant information, exploiting a new kind of source, synthesizing old sources to make a new point, taking a new approach, developing a new method or technique, giving a new answer to an old question, inventing a new question. In all of these cases, the weight-bearing adjective is not "new" but "illuminating". Whatever its kind, originality should shed light beyond its own focus, both backwards (previous scholarship must be rethought) and forwards (subsequent scholarship will probably change direction). Authors should make clear not only what is new but also what is at stake beyond their own topic.

6. Personal Voice: This is probably the criterion most specific to the humanities (rare though by no means absent in the modern sciences) and the one most subject to abuse. A strongly voiced work of scholarship carries the imprint of a personality -- choice of problem, approach, literary style, mode of argument, shape of narrative, underlying intuitions are distinctive (sometimes to the point of making nonsense of double-blind refereeing: "by the claw thou shall know the lion"). The reasons for valuing a distinctive voice are both cognitive and aesthetic: that individual's insights are inimitable and penetrating like no others; the individual style in which they are expressed gives pleasure to both writer and reader alike. It often includes a personal vision for future research. The dangers of the cult of the individual voice need not be belabored: to revere personal authority for its own sake undermines every maxim of critical scholarship. But to ban the personal voice would be perhaps even more damaging to scholarship in the humanities, depriving it of its virtuosi and the qualities that bring the humanities closer to the arts.

7. Relevance: Both the sciences and the humanities are under increasing pressure to prove the larger social relevance of their research. Because "relevance" is so often interpreted to mean "immediate practical applications" or "marketable products", all research that pursues broader and longer term goals is put at a disadvantage by a narrow, short-sighted construal of this criterion. Relevance in the humanities is defined by a deeper understanding of human experience, often but not exclusively in the context of the particular community to which the scholar feels a primary responsibility. Such deepened understanding can remake society, especially in the medium to long term. Historians who have reconstructed the experience of previously invisible social groups;

social scientists who have investigated whether political measures do or do not achieve their intended goals as well as their unintended consequences; cultural critics who challenge long-held assumptions about power and privilege -- all these are examples of how the humanities and social sciences are relevant in ways that dwarf the short-term impact of a new gadget or drug. In these cases, the humanities contribute new knowledge and new perspectives to civic debate among all citizens, beyond the confines of official politics. For this reason, publishers, editors, and critics as well as fellow scholars may sometimes also be judges of relevance. The relevance of the humanities can be and has been amplified by an alliance with the arts, as when museum curators, filmmakers, and artists have translated the findings of humanists into powerful interpretations that challenge the public to rethink what they thought they knew. Relevance in the humanities should be assessed by the potential to change not only what scholars, but also citizens at large, think, debate, and value.