

Drees's What Are the Humanities For?

With Peter Harrison, "Defining and Defending the Humanities"; Michael Ruse, "Willem Drees on the Humanities"; Douglas F. Ottati, "Theology among the Human Humanities"; Lisa L. Stenmark, "Who Are the Humanities For? Decolonizing the Humanities"; Donald L. Drakeman, "Some Second Thoughts about the Humanities"; and Willem B. Drees, "The Coherence and Character of the Humanities: A Reply to Critics."

WHO ARE THE HUMANITIES FOR? DECOLONIZING THE HUMANITIES

by Lisa L. Stenmark

Abstract. Drees makes a strong case for the importance of the humanities in the university, providing an excellent resource for anyone in the Western Academy. Its usefulness for those who want to work outside the West is limited, however, because he does not engage with literature that challenges its methods and disciplines. If we are to have a positive global impact, we need to do more than clarify existing boundaries, we need to blur them, beginning with an examination of inherent biases reflected in its history, structure, and content. This article focuses on one critique, a decolonial critique of the Western view that ontology precedes epistemology (an external reality produces knowledge). Outside the modern Western Academy, epistemologies create ontologies (epistemic creations/stories about the world give us a sense of the world and its materiality). I describe a relational understanding of knowledge and how this changes our understanding of the humanities and our epistemic responsibilities.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt; critical theories; Simone de Beauvoir; decoloniality; epistemic responsibilities; epistemology; feminist philosophy; ontology

In *What Are the Humanities For?* (2021) Willem Drees explores the nature of the humanities as a coherent set of disciplines, with a coherent set of scholarly expectations. This readable and comprehensive discussion draws from a wide range of sources—including Kwame Anthony Appiah, Francis Bacon, Rens Bod, Stefan Collini, Daniel Dennett, Clifford Geertz, Thomas Kuhn, William James, Martha Nussbaum, and Antonin

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Scalia (to name but a few!)—and provides helpful examples to illustrate important points. He describes humanities as a “scholarly study of the human world” that includes “stories and histories, languages and literatures, religions and moralities” (1–2), which are part of the human effort to understand ourselves and our cultures more deeply, but is also essential for understanding other people and other cultures. Drees makes a strong case for the importance of the humanities in the university, describing its important and multi-faceted contributions and its commercial, social, cultural, and public value. In a time when many question the role of the humanities in the university, as well as its value in our society, this is an excellent resource for anyone working within the Western Academy.

And therein lies the rub, because while this is an excellent resource for those wanting to understand the role of the humanities in the Western Academy, its usefulness for those in the Western Academy who want to work with and between other cultures is somewhat limited. To that end, I found myself wishing that he had stepped further outside of the mostly white, mostly male canon of Western scholarship and taken the opportunity to engage more with the increasing literature that challenges the Western Academy to rethink the humanities in light of the inherent biases reflected in its history, structure, and content.

These biases do not go unacknowledged. In the very first chapter, Drees refers to Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s reflections on a series of lectures he gave in Istanbul. Harpham began this series thinking the humanities were a “global undertaking” but ended convinced that they represent “a specifically American or at least Western, modern, and secular version of human being and human flourishing” (12). Harpham is not alone in his concerns, of course, and there are well over three decades of feminist, decolonial, and other critical approaches to draw from that flesh out the ways that the humanities reflect the biases of a particular time and place. But, while Drees acknowledges that the humanities “might be suspect as an imperialist extrapolation,” (12) he does not elaborate on why this might be or address these concerns. Instead, he merely asserts that despite these concerns, he is “convinced that the ideals of scholarship involved do have global significance” (12).

Like Drees, I believe that Western scholarship, in general, and the humanities, in particular, can and do have global significance. But if that significance is going to be positive, as opposed to, say, simply an extension of colonialism, those of us in the Western Academy need to do more than simply acknowledge the sins of the past. We need to meaningfully engage with the deep and expanding literature on the ways that the Western Academy in general, and the humanities in particular, represent “a specifically American or at least Western, modern, and secular version of human being and human flourishing.” One does not have to agree with that literature, but any comprehensive discussion of the humanities, particularly in

a cross- or intercultural context, should at least take it into account. Drees does an excellent job of describing the humanities in the context of Western scholarship, clarifying, and reinforcing existing boundaries, but if the humanities are to be a global (meaning cross- or intercultural) discipline, we will need to *challenge* and *blur* those boundaries. That begins by an examination of our practices and disciplines through the lenses of various critical theories. We need to do more than describe what the humanities *are*, we need to begin to describe what they *could* and *should* be in a global context.

Various critical approaches—feminist, race, queer, decolonial, among others—raise a number of issues that are crucial for rethinking the humanities (and, more pointedly, the science and religion discourse). This includes the way “humanity” and “human experience” has been defined by Western, male scholars to reflect their own experiences (and in opposition to non-Western cultures and women, which were understood as less than human) as well as idea of the humanities themselves as distance from “natural sciences,” which reflects the Western distinction between nature and culture. These definitions and distinctions are not givens—they emerge at a particular time and a particular place (Europe during the colonial/modern era) and reflect the values of that time and place. These various critical perspectives suggest a need to rethink how we deal with difference and reconsider the relationship between the human and non-human worlds that is reflected in the distinction between (for example) religion and science.

We also need to pay more attention to the ways that the discourses and disciplines of Western scholarship are intertwined with colonial ideologies. To that end, this article will focus on decolonial critiques of epistemology—how we understand knowledge and knowledge production—and some of the implications they have for thinking about the role and responsibilities of Western scholars. I will begin with a discussion of Drees’ chapter on “Responsible Scholarship,” pointing out that his understanding of knowledge and knowledge production—particularly his emphasis on facts and objectivity—reflects a particular, Western, approach to knowledge. Building on decolonial critiques, I will suggest an alternative understanding of knowledge production—one built on the assertion that knowledge is relational. I will conclude by exploring how this kind of epistemology might change our understanding of the humanities and the epistemic values, and responsibilities, associated with the humanities (as well as other scholarly disciplines).

RESPONSIBLE SCHOLARSHIP

Drees begins this chapter by asserting that we need objective knowledge, which he defines as knowledge that is “as reliable as possible” and

warranted because it is based on evidence, not on prejudice or fear. He then asks, “to what extent can we expect a scholar in the humanities to deliver knowledge that is value free, or rather, knowledge that is guided by knowledge promoting values” (94). He begins by outlining the values that produce warranted, objective knowledge, which include the kind of “role-specific neutrality” in which scholars suspend “*personal judgments*” and “aspire to do ‘value-free’ research . . . that is not determined by the likes and dislikes of the scholar” (103), being fair to those studied while simultaneously moving beyond their own self-understanding, respect, neutrality, diversity, and transparency. Building on a discussion of the similarities and differences between the humanities and the natural sciences, particularly in their reliance on inductive and hypothetical-inductive approaches, he makes the case that this supports similarly the epistemic legitimacy of the humanities. The natural sciences gain credibility through methodical research and results, the discovery of things like natural laws. The humanities also apply methodical research and look for patterns and anomalies in the human world. The scholar of the humanities might begin with the self-perceptions of those studied, but then critically expand on that through the application of analytical concepts that are removed from the immediacy of the experience. As with the natural sciences, it is important to establish “the facts first” (106). These facts can be revised with new information, but “the main thrust would be to work with those facts, and build up our knowledge, through comparative studies and other forms of analysis” (107).

The problem with this approach to defend the reliability of the humanities is not the desire for reliable knowledge, nor the desire to promote knowledge-producing values. The problem is that Drees appears to assume that reliable knowledge requires a “neutrality” in which the knowers are as far removed from the object of knowledge as possible and rely on value-free facts. As such, he is using a particular understanding of science as a model for reliable knowledge production. This tendency to compare the humanities to the natural sciences to support its epistemic and scholarly value is not unique to Drees, of course, and it might be that his audience is predominantly made up of scientists and he wants to find a point of reference. Or, perhaps, it reflects that curious habit in the humanities to emulate the sciences as a way to compensate for the uncertainties of our disciplines (Rorty 1991, 35). Whatever the reason, this understanding of objectivity and knowledge suggests that both knowledge and knowledge-producing values are universal. This ignores decades of scholarship in the humanities that demonstrate how this view is wrong. All knowledge-producing values are local, reflecting a particular time and place, and the knowledge that they produce is similarly local. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, this notion of neutrality, value-free judgments and facts undermines constructive engagement between the humanities and the natural sciences (Sten-

mark 2015), which is even more problematic in a cross-cultural context in which claims of objectivity have been, and continue to be, used to delegitimize other knowledge systems.

In this chapter, as in the rest of the book, Drees would have benefited from bringing Western epistemic values into conversation with critical theories, as well as non-Western scholars, to explore what it means to “know” and what ethical responsibilities this confers upon scholars. This would not necessarily mean an abandonment of Western values, but it would certainly contextualize them. In the next section, I will explore one such critique of Western epistemology, a decolonial one.

COLONIALITY, DECOLONIALITY, AND WESTERN EPISTEMOLOGY

Decoloniality is not the same as decolonizing, because coloniality is not the same as colonialism. Coloniality refers to the ideas, concepts, beliefs, worldview, and so on that created and continue to sustain a world that is shaped by colonial patterns of domination, where some people define themselves as superior to others in ways that are sometimes overt, and sometimes subtle. As Drees notes, ideas lead to action, but those ideas and those actions are also embedded in a way of life. Coloniality is shorthand for a complex system of interconnected knowledge, institutions, and epistemic domains (e.g., theology, philosophy, science, politics, economics, biology) that has built, managed, and controlled a Eurocentric way of life. If one wants to transform a Eurocentric way of life, it is not enough to address its political institutions and structures, we must contend with the realm of ideas. One of the foundational institutions of this colonial/Eurocentric system is the university, which is run by actors ingrained in, and subjected to, Western beliefs and the effects of the totality of knowledge (Mignolo 2018, 212, 121). The transformation of coloniality necessarily starts with epistemological decolonization and, for the Western Academy, this means the log in our own eye.

Fundamental to the structure of Western epistemology is the belief that ontology precedes epistemology. In other words, this is the belief that there is an external world that produces knowledge about the world—what we know conforms to what is. This is certainly evident in Drees’ approach in which reliable knowledge is knowledge that is built on and conforms to facts. Again, this belief is not in itself a problem, nor is the attempt to provide comprehensive explanations for the phenomena we encounter—all cultures attempt to be accurate and comprehensive. The problem is that it suggests that some human beings are able to get outside of a particular culture or location, and have access to an external ontological reality. It implies that the knowledge they produce is therefore universal, meaning that it is true for everyone, everywhere. More to the point, it leads to the conclusion that only knowledge that is produced in this way provides

access to the way things really are, to the reality behind appearances, so it is justifiable to discount and exclude other ways of knowing. “The problem with universals is that, in aiming at the totality, they become totalitarian” (Mignolo 2018, 177). This idea that reality itself produces knowledge (for some people) is not merely a product of a particular place—Europe—it reflects a particular time, the emergence of colonialism /modernity.

Christianity, for example, originally thought of itself as one cosmology among many. It was not unusual that Christians believed that their cosmology was superior, but it was accepted that there were other ways of understanding reality. During the colonial era, Christianity came to see itself as universal—not *a* cosmology, but *the* cosmology that was true for everyone everywhere. This is reflected in a shift from seeing Christianity as a proper faith to the only proper faith (Harrison 2015; Stenmark 2018). This universalism was used to justify colonial expansion. This structure was gradually taken over by Western science, which has established itself as a universal epistemic totality (Stenmark 2018, Mignolo 2018; Adas 1989).

Although Western scholarship treats it as self-evident that ontologies establish epistemologies, this is not the case for the rest of the world, or in the West before the Modern Era. Epistemologies—or, more accurately, cosmologies, which are epistemic creations (stories) about the way that the world works—enable us to perceive the world and establish our relationship to the world. The “materiality of the world,” is shaped by our sense of the world, projected through things like stories, concepts, and so on. It is through existing knowledge, or epistemology, “that entities and relations are conceived, perceived, sensed, and described.” What we know creates the world, not the other way around. We “do not see what is; we see what we see” (Mignolo 2018, 196, citing Humberto Maturana).

A good example of this difference between these two constructions is suggested by the difference between Western and Indigenous religious traditions. Many of my students are attracted to Indigenous traditions for a variety of reasons, and perplexed that non-Native people cannot, for example, join the Native American Church, and that even participating in rituals is often frowned upon. For them, a true belief or practice reflects a distinct reality, which must therefore be true for everyone and everyone should be able to participate. For Indigenous people, however, there are many truths and many true ways to live. Indigenous beliefs and practices cannot be separated from a particular way of life in a particular place. If you want to participate in that indigenous religion, you have to participate in that way of life in that particular place. (It is worth noting that Western beliefs and practices also cannot be separated from that way of life, and for many that way of life is an indictment of Western beliefs and practices. You judge a tree by its fruits.)

The claim that epistemology creates an ontology does not mean that nothing exists. It is also not a rejection of a Western worldview, or of

Western knowledge, it is simply an acknowledgment that a Western understanding of the world and how it works is just that, a Western understanding, one way among many. There is no best way to know, there is no epistemology or ontology waiting in the wings to replace Western thought with another system. There are many ways of knowing the world, and many ways of being in the world, which means that there are many worlds: “a world of many worlds.” The goal is not to establish a single world or a single way of knowing. Because we live in a world of many worlds, the truth is always in parentheses, and there is no knowledge without an adjective—not knowledge, but *Western* knowledge.

This understanding of knowledge is relational. What we know is not produced by what is known, it is produced by our relationships with communities that tell the stories that shape our world and with the “objects” of our knowledge that are granted their own kinds of subjectivities. This is a way of knowing in which knowledge can emerge in and across cultures, “in the ways that different local histories and embodied conceptions and practices of decoloniality, including our own, can enter into conversations and build understandings that both cross-geopolitical locations and colonial differences, and contest the totalizing claims and political-epistemic violence of modernity” (Mignolo 2018, 1).

Drees’ understanding of the way that the humanities provide legitimate knowledge is problematic in a cross-cultural context because it relies on a model of knowledge that is rooted in a colonial construction of knowledge. Instead of asserting that what we know conforms (or should conform) to what is, what would it mean to focus on the way that what we know shapes the world? What would be the implications of focusing on relationships in terms of knowledge? Although there are certainly decolonial, indigenous, and other resources for developing this approach, I am somewhat hesitant to wander too far down that path, first because of the dangers of appropriation, but also because the goal is not to find *the* better approach (which might then be appropriated), but to more fully develop each particular understanding of the world in relation to others. We need to be able to embody and move between multiple worldview and worlds, not seek out or synthesize the best one. To that end, I would like to suggest that there are multiple resources within the Western canon, including feminist and other critical theories, that can challenge this ontological view. In what follows, I would like to explore the contributions of what I have elsewhere described as a “worldly approach” (Stenmark 2015), which builds on the work of Hannah Arendt as well as feminist and other trajectories. In this understanding, everything that we humans know, create, and develop is produced by and becomes part of a world, which shapes us even as we shape it. After laying out this approach, I will touch on some implications for what we might mean by “responsible scholarship” in this worldly context.

I do want to emphasize that this approach is not decolonial per se, and I am addressing only one aspect of a decolonial critique of knowledge. I am not, for example, addressing the colonial history behind our approaches and concepts, and I am accepting the existing boundaries around the “humanities” and the other disciplines. These concepts, approaches and boundaries are also problematic, and rethinking these and finding other options (“delinking”) will clearly need to be part of any effort to transform our disciplines. Moreover, I want to acknowledge that I am using the term “world” as Arendt did, to refer to the human world, which is similar to the idea of a culture. The world is a human construction that includes artifacts, ideas, art, poetry, bureaucracies, traditions, and so on. It transcends the individual—we are born into it, it shapes us, we contribute to it, and it continues on when we die. When Mignolo and others speak of the ways that knowledge produces “a world of many worlds,” it is not clear to me that they are using the term in the same way (and other times it is clear that they are not). It may be necessary, therefore, to rethink the concept of “the world,” particularly how it might encompass both the human and nonhuman. But since I am focusing on the humanities here—which clearly does deal with the world as Arendt understood it—I think it is fair (for now) to bracket the question of whether and how this understanding of “the world” needs to be expanded.

A “WORLDLY” KNOWLEDGE

A worldly approach to knowledge situates all knowledge in relationship to a particular world: those who know are shaped by an existing world, and the knowledge they produce becomes a part of that world. Knowledge is relational because all knowers are embedded in a web of relationships within their particular world, a web that includes other people, of course, but also the things, ideas, and so on that are known. Because both knowers and known are part of an existing world, any understanding of objectivity or facts as somehow independent of the world is counterproductive because objectivity understood in this way *distorts* whatever it is, we are attempting to understand. Drees does acknowledge that subjective judgments are relevant for, for example, ethics, but this understanding extends beyond ethics. This is a point Hannah Arendt makes when defending herself against accusations that her treatment of the Holocaust and of Nazi death camps was not objective enough. She argued that objectivity distorted the phenomenon of camps because to describe the camps without being horrified is to misrepresent the camps. She used the example of extreme poverty, “the natural human reaction to these conditions is one of anger and indignation” because they are an affront to human dignity. She continues, “[i]f I describe these conditions without permitting my indignation to interfere, I have lifted this particular phenomenon out of its

context in human society and have thereby robbed it of part of its nature” because indignation “is one of the qualities of excessive poverty insofar as poverty occurs among human beings.” Similarly, any description of the camps that relies on a kind of “objectivity” that is detached from horror distorts the camps because mass murder *is* horrifying (Arendt 2000, 159, see also Disch 1994, 127).

It is important to note that this rejection of detached notions of objectivity would also extend to natural phenomena. Arendt claims it is impossible to “objectively” describe poverty, genocide, or other social phenomena not because they have human origins, but because they impact human beings: “to arouse indignation is one of the qualities of excessive poverty *insofar as poverty occurs among human beings*.” To the extent that we are concerned with knowledge, therefore, there is no real distinction between the human and natural world and, thus, between the natural and social sciences and the humanities. Everything human beings encounter, create, or know becomes a part of their world, and there is no reason to distinguish between knowledge of the natural as opposed to the human world. From the perspective of human life, and the world in which we live, move, and interact, once something comes into contact with human beings, it becomes a part of our human world, impacting what we think, who we are, and who we can be.

Because our responses to phenomena are a part of those phenomena, any notion of objectivity as detached from the world is also problematic because that would deprive us of an important source of knowledge and understanding: our experiences. Arendt’s personal encounter with Nazi Germany, and her subjective “sense” of what happened to human beings in the camps, was not a hindrance to understanding, it was the only way to understand it. Simone de Beauvoir provides a memorable example in *The Second Sex* when she asserted that women’s experiences were a better source of knowledge about women than any objective claim, including those of science. Women know what it means to be a woman *not* because they are neutral or objective, but because they are *neither*. Women “know the feminine world more intimately than do the men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to a human being to be feminine; and we are more concerned with such knowledge” (de Beauvoir 1952, xxxii). When a woman is told “you only believe it because you are a woman,” she should agree, because the assertion that that “I believe it because it is true,” denies the importance of subjectivity for what we know. A woman’s experience makes her more, not less, qualified, to understand women, and so women would be wise to reject claims that conflicted with their own experiences. (Although it might seem obvious that women know what it means to be a woman, it is worth noting that it was not until decades after de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* that it became obvious that people—men—accepted that a woman’s

experience was at least as legitimate as “objective”—male—observations about women. There are quite a few men who still do not accept it.)

The broader point is that we cannot distinguish the object of knowledge from our experience of it. This means that the subjective experience of others is also a resource for knowledge. A worldly approach to knowledge is thus not only relational, it is plural. Reliable knowledge is not achieved by narrowing down to a single experience, but through an *exchange* of experiences—the more the better. Arendt called this exchange of experiences storytelling, which describes the exchange of experiences by which we come to understand the world better. Storytelling is impartial, not because the storyteller does not take sides, but because stories allow us to take many sides at once without settling. Stories include the subjective judgments of the storyteller, but these judgments are not definitive, because stories are never unquestionable or exhaustive and a good story invites questions and new interpretations. This is the distinction between storytelling and testimony: testimony asserts “this is the way *I* see the world” and wants emphatic affirmation, while a story exhorts its author to “go visiting,” asking, “how would *you* see the world if you saw it from *my* position?” Storytellers do not demand assent, or that we assimilate a different perspective, stories are an invitation to converse and to discover how another perspective differs from our own (Disch 1994).

To return to the example of women’s experience. In a 1976 interview, de Beauvoir explained that the “ideal would be to have many different women, from as many cultures as possible, articulate their own lived experiences. Thus, in dialogue, women could compare the prejudices of their own cultures in light of different prejudices in other cultures” (Gerassi 1976, 84). The goal is not to definitively describe “woman” once and for all. This would inevitably mean universalizing the experience of those in positions of power, negating the experiences of all others, thus, the critique that first wave feminism defined women in a way that reflected the experience of White, middle class, women. The goal is also not to replace these women’s experiences with some more authentic women’s experience, nor is it to synthesize all experiences down to a universal common denominator. Reducing “women” down to a single, universal experience would have the totalizing effect of negating all the other ways of being a woman. Instead, storytelling involves continually changing and expanding our understanding of what we mean by “woman.” This does not mean that there is no such thing as a woman, it means that there are many ways to be a woman, ways that we may not yet be aware of, and ways that we discover through this exchange of experiences. No one way is more authentic or superior, they are just different. A world of many worlds is also a world of many women.

The discussion of who defines “women” and whose experiences become normative raises the issue of the relationship between power and

knowledge—the experiences and perspective of those in relative positions of power become normative, distorting, negating, and pathologizing other experiences. This relationship is a central aspect of many critical approaches to Western epistemology, and yet Drees largely ignores this, except for a few passing references and a somewhat jaw-dropping discussion of Daniel Dennett, and his description of a virus unleashed upon a “Third World” country, which raised infant mortality, undermines health and bolsters the power of a ruling despot. The virus? Claims by “postmodern science critics” that Western science was a colonial imposition that should not be “privileged” in relation to native traditions. Although I could not help but wonder where this country was where children died and despots came to power because of the influence of postmodern philosophers, Drees asserts that these concerns are prompted by real events, and that the lesson we are to take from this is that “[p]laying down well established knowledge serves those in power... while being disadvantageous to women, to homosexuals and other minority groups” (100). Absent a reference to the “real events” that prompted these concerns, it is hard to know what Drees is arguing here. Is he suggesting that the humanities should not criticize science for fear that it will make things worse in the “Third World”? This is not only patronizing, it suggests we should ignore a long history in which colonialism and science (and religion) were intertwined ideologically and institutionally in ways that created the “Third World,” along with poverty, hunger, misogyny, homophobia, despotism, and a host of other ills.

Moreover, his assertion that “well-established” knowledge helps the poor and oppressed, as opposed to those in power, flies in the face of well-established critiques (and common sense!) about the ways that knowledge works to the benefit of those in power. Again, you do not have to agree with Michel Foucault or his intellectual descendants, or Franz Fanon and his intellectual descendants, or Sandra Bartky and her intellectual descendants, but you do have to at least address their concerns. And, if you are going to suggest that “well-established” knowledge is on the side of the disadvantaged, it might be good to address the question of “well-established” by whom and for whom.

WHO ARE THE HUMANITIES FOR?

As the discussion of decolonial critiques above suggests, in cross-cultural contexts the question is not just “what are the humanities for” but “who are the humanities for” and who are they by? This is a relational, not an ontological, approach to knowledge that leads to an acknowledgement of the contextual nature of the humanities, and all scholarship, and takes our colonial history into account. This approach suggests a number of ethical responsibilities, many of which align with Drees’ description in the chapter on Responsible Scholarship. We have a responsibility for “knowing

well,” which means an obligation to be responsible knowers. This includes reliability in terms of the content of knowledge, but as Lorraine Code suggests, knowing well means not just accountability to the evidence, it includes “an accountability . . . of knowing subjects to the community” (Code 1993, 20). Epistemic responsibility to others within the knowing community, includes being self-critical, trustworthy, and willing to deliberate in good faith. The communities themselves must be able to tolerate criticism, there must be “uptake,” meaning that beliefs and theories must (at least sometimes) change in response to them.

Where this view of epidemic responsibility differs from the one that Drees suggests is that it does not focus only on the facts, or on the behaviors and practices that produce facts, it includes a responsibility to consider the impact that knowledge has on the world. This does not mean that truth and facts are unimportant, but our primary concern is to incorporate them into a world that is fit for human habitation. This, I think, is a very special obligation of the humanities. Like the natural and social sciences, the humanities produce knowledge, along with art, literature, and other artifacts that make up our world. Because the world is constructed by a totality of facts, events, and artifacts, in order for these things to create a world, they must become a part of that world. This happens when they become part of a story in which they acquire a humanly comprehensible meaning. Through history, religion, art, literature, and philosophy, the humanities create that story, infusing the world with meaning, transforming it from a place of people and things that merely cohabitate into a world that we share. The humanities do not just provide knowledge, they make knowledge meaningful.

Our responsibility to the world includes the responsibility to be critical of a world that does not promote human flourishing for many of us, and that threatens other life on the planet as well. It means recognizing the mistakes and errors of the past and actively working to undo them. As scholars, we have a moral responsibility to take the time to understand how colonial ideologies are intertwined with what we know and how we know it, not just because ideas lead to action but because ideas create a way of life. As I was writing the piece, U.S. political pundit, former senator, and presidential candidate Rick Santorum caught flack for celebrating American culture, declaring, that “We birthed a nation from nothing. I mean, there was nothing here. I mean, yes we have Native Americans, but candidly there isn’t much Native American culture in American culture.” These ideas do not come from nowhere, they are embedded in (among other things) our understanding of what knowledge is and who is a responsible knower. Colonial ideologies are embedded in our ways of life, and we have an obligation to address them.

Scholars also have an epistemic responsibility to help us fit our knowledge into a story that helps us deal with uncertainty, and to deal with

difference in a way that does not require creating a synthesis or a hierarchy. Code suggests that we think of knowledge in terms of knowing people, because knowing others is never fixed or complete, in part because the “who” we know is never fixed or complete. But even though “who” people are is always in flux, it is still fixed enough “to permit references to and ongoing relationships with ‘this person.’” Our relationships with other people do (or should) challenge our temptation to think “now I know all there is to know about her,” and we can be surprised when what we thought we knew turns out to be wrong. Similarly, the discussion of what a “woman” is suggests that we can be open to the constant flux of understanding without settling on a single reality or understanding of it. Our differences are not a challenge to our certainty, but an opportunity for dialogue and exploration and for deeper understanding. It is a process that involves numerous, fluid conversations and statements that are provisional and revisable. This does not mean that we stop seeking more and better knowledge, but that we bear in mind that the goal is not knowledge, the goal is to establish a world that is fit for human, and planetary, flourishing, and open to a variety of ways of achieving it.

Drees argues that the humanities provide knowledge that can be as reliable as the knowledge produced by the natural sciences. But to the extent that the humanities can situate knowledge in such a way that it helps us live with uncertainty, opens us up to difference, and draws us into relationship with each other and with the world(s) we want to know, perhaps instead of providing legitimacy to humanities by making them look more like the sciences, we might focus on the ways that the humanities provide legitimacy to science by making science more human, and by helping us live together in a world of many worlds, both human and nonhuman.

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