

Willem B. Drees' book defends the humanities as a valuable endeavor in understanding human beings that is vibrant and essential for the academic *and* non-academic world. With respect to which academic fields count as part of the humanities, how they relate to other academic fields, what the methods and aims are, and why we should foster them, the overall picture of the humanities that is conveyed by the book is a classic one – and that is not a bad thing. Drees' book presents this classic picture from a diversity of perspectives: be it the perspective of the evolutionary scientist, that of the lawyer or the priest, who must interpret texts to succeed as a professional, or the viewpoint of the university administrator, who must decide how to organize and foster the academic world.

Part I, "What Are the Humanities?", specifies in detail how the humanities enable understanding of others and oneself, via the interpretation of "self-understandings and self-expressions, and of the ways in which people thereby construct and experience the world they live in." (7) The result: knowledge *about* humans and *for* humans. Some of that knowledge is case-specific, some more pattern-oriented. With respect to the methods and epistemic values involved in the humanities, Drees convincingly presents the humanities as similar to the social and natural sciences: they all aim at objective knowledge. This is not in conflict, according to him, with the well-known fact of reflexivity, i.e., that "we humans are *subjects* who develop such knowledge about *subjects*, about persons who also have an inner life, who experience the world, and who intend to shape their world" (10, emphasis in the original). The solution to that conundrum consists for the humanities, according to Drees, still in the method of interpretation (also called hermeneutics), the age-old cornerstone of the humanities. And for Drees that solution also involves a commitment to the value-neutrality of the scholar as an ideal, as well as a commitment to treating the studied subjects as persons rather than things, which includes taking the diversity of perspectives involved seriously (of those studied and those studying). These commitments guard against bias and parochialism.

In Part II, entitled "Who Needs the Humanities?", the book shows that humanities happen whenever somebody tries to understand human beings. A citizen interacting with another, a professional having to interpret a text (e.g., a law), or a historian talking to another historian about the latest news in that discipline – they are all doing humanities. According to Drees, even animals are doing "canine humanities" (1), in particular, if they interact with us, while we do "human humanities" (2). The reasons why humanities should be furthered are accordingly multi-faceted: they can be good existentially, economically, for democracy, and just good in and of themselves.

The book is short (less than 200 pages), but quite broad in coverage. It touches on many things that could be discussed in more detail (in the book, as well as here), e.g., the claims about the evolution of humans, scientific methodology in general, the traditional *Verstehen* (understanding) versus *Erklären* (explaining) divide, or how to deal with authorial intent. Yet, in the following, I want to highlight two issues that might be considered as unusual or controversial.

First, what might be regarded as unusual is the healthy naturalism that drives the book. Even though the traditional divides of natural vs. human, causes vs. meaning, understanding vs. explanation are used (as usual), to defend the specificity of the humanities, it is noteworthy that the humanities are *not* considered as a miracle, resulting from inexplicable insights of high-spirited superheroes of (mostly Western) 'civilization.' The humanities are presented as hand-made, *human* humanities, and global in orientation, as something that everyone is engaged in, and that one can simply learn doing well, just like one can learn other things. Humanities are, according to Drees, a "human necessity." (37) This is important since in actual social reality, in my opinion, the humanities have often functioned as an echo chamber for those in power rather than serving all of humanity equally. Drees' book stays away from such tendencies. At the same time, he

speaks up against economizing the humanities, arguing against the language of 'impact', 'assessment,' and 'deliverables.'

Second, what might be regarded as controversial is his defense of value-neutrality, as part of his vision of responsible scholarship. The humanities appear as the powerhouse of objective, critical, and free reflection. The freedom involved is double-sided, involving freedom from outside pressure *and* inside value-ladenness, both taken as negatively biasing academic research. Given that the value-free picture of science has been challenged not only as a *realistic* goal, but also as an *ideal*, this might be the most controversial claim of the book. Drees is not really engaging with those in the (philosophy of) humanities (or social and natural sciences) who, independently from the history of religious studies, oppose value-freedom as an ideal. Yet, Drees is aware of that challenge, which is nicely shown by his examples, which often portray the difficulties involved in doing humanities. He discusses, for instance, a case of positive appropriation of research, in which the research first challenged a specific religious community in their self-interpretation of their tradition, but eventually the community found a way to incorporate the new knowledge. He introduces a case of wrongful, careless scholarly use of a specific self-interpretation of the people studied, in which the researchers became complicit in the agenda of the group, violating their goal to ultimately speak *to* and *for* humanity (rather than to or for a specific group of humans). He also brings up cases of what is nowadays called 'no platforming,' examples from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary ones, showing that issues of standpoint epistemology (who is allowed to say something on X) and disagreement (how to deal with conflicts in interpretation and critique) are far from new. A 16<sup>th</sup> century case of fake humanities (a strategic invention of a fake Greek manuscript) reminds us that fake truths are quite old.

Thus, despite the idealist outlook, the book shows (as a side result) that such issues are neither new nor fully solved. The book is also a reminder that, it is so important to distinguish between understanding and justifying, between studying and sharing beliefs, identities, interpretations, etc., between being a scholar, a critic, or an advocate. There will always be advocates and critics, but if there were no humanities scholars anymore, much would be lost, and unnecessarily so. Drees shows us what the impoverishment of losing the humanities would amount to. In addition, Drees himself stays nicely neutral and 'dry', writing in that style that we still call 'scholarly' because of its unagitated tone. 'Scholarly dry,' I call that tone; and it makes the book a pleasure to read. Sometimes, however, he simultaneously describes *and* advocates the humanities, even though he claims that the two stances should be kept separate, and even though he divided up the book accordingly, with the first part aimed at a description and the second part aimed at a defense.

The book is not written for those already working in the humanities (they will have heard of the claims and issues discussed before). It is written for those who do not know the humanities from within or are thinking about studying it (as a student or as a scholar to analyze them), or those having to decide about its future in (higher) education. The book is broadly informed and deserves praise for its accessibility. The historical debates that relate to understanding the humanities (Descartes on dualism, Schleiermacher on hermeneutics, Müller on studying religion scientifically, Clifford on the ethics of believe, etc.) are nicely introduced, without them getting too heavy a load for the read. The examples are, as mentioned, helpful, accessible, and engaging, even if they predominantly come from religious studies, a focus justified by the author's own expertise. Yet, even somebody not particularly interested in religion will get the points made and will be able to transfer them to other fields in the humanities, thanks to the clarity that characterizes the book (and be it for the prize of an occasional repetitiveness).

In sum, the book is plain and straight, without simplifying things beyond need given the length and scope of the book, an easy-to-understand, self-standing defense of the humanities.