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The Nature of the Humanities

This chapter falls into two parts and is based upon the interview responses. The first part asks whether there are any patterns detectable in the research themes or topics chosen for humanities research. We found that socially relevant themes were prominent (though less so among the European interviewees) and that interviewees often identified cross-fertilisation as the way forward, especially interdisciplinarity, collaboration and comparative research. The second part considers a set of epistemological questions: how do researchers conceive of their work? Do they see themselves as seeking to advance the frontiers of knowledge, making discoveries and sometimes even breakthroughs? Or do they consider that such attitudes are more suitable to the sciences? We found that most researchers believed that the humanities do produce knowledge but were pessimistic as to how society perceives and values the humanities.

Part I

In Section 3 of the questionnaire we asked:

What themes have been dominating your own field?

What themes do you expect to dominate your field?

Where do you see the potential breakthroughs in your field?

We looked for patterns, either regionally or worldwide: were any particular themes pervasive, or did the responses indicate that humanities research is fragmented?

We should comment briefly on the way the respondents approached this section of the questionnaire. A very few did not answer the questions

at all, and sometimes a respondent made no comment to one of the questions. The responses also varied greatly in length. Sometimes they used a single word and at the other extreme wrote a long paragraph with follow-up references. There were also variations in the level of abstraction. Some answered the question in very general terms; others gave very specific examples from their own field. Many gave both types of answer. Also, some respondents took the question to be about their own research or that of their institute, rather than about their field generally.

Some respondents challenged the terms of the questions, particularly in the case of the third question. A few asked whether talk of breakthroughs was actually appropriate in the humanities. This raises an epistemological issue, which we discuss in Part II. Occasionally, respondents queried whether there are dominant themes in research, past or present, but this response was quite rare.

Thematic orientations

Overview

We initially divided the responses into three categories. At the specific or micro-level, we were given examples of research themes such as:

- Russian towns
- Ottoman Empire as seen from the periphery
- Early modern England
- Palestinian refugees
- Applied Buddhism
- Athenian democracy
- James Joyce and Wallace.

At the more general or macro-level, we had examples such as:

- Race, class and gender
- Modernism and modernities
- Visual culture
- Identity
- Ethnicity and nationalities
- Media
- Memory (especially in relation to war)
- Postcoloniality
- History of crime.

At a still more abstract level, were some theoretical and methodological tendencies:

- The shift from economic historical perspectives to ideological transformation
- The cultural turn in history in contrast to the materialist turn in sociology
- Critical humanities
- Postmodernism, in contrast to the rapprochement between humanities and sciences
- The digital humanities
- Comparative history
- Post-critical sociology
- Interdisciplinarity.

The macro-level: socially relevant themes

We were unlikely to find many patterns by looking at the micro-level, given the relatively small size of our sample, but even when we looked at the macro-level, few themes reached double digits. The exceptions included gender, which appeared in 13 responses, and identity, which appeared in 12. By abstracting a little further we met with a little more success and when using 'culture' as a keyword we found over 20 responses that made some sort of reference to the word.

On their own, these results do not entitle us to draw any interesting conclusions. But things change if we consider these results in the light of some of the findings from the previous chapter: here we saw that over 50% of researchers stressed the social value of humanities research, and also that many researchers put a strong emphasis on heritage. For the purpose of looking at thematic patterns, let us now bunch these two together and look across the macro themes to ask: to what extent are humanities researchers connected to the societal concerns that surround them? How frequently did our respondents mention socially relevant research themes? A brief look at the topics listed under the heading of macro-themes suggests a social orientation in the research topics, which is borne out by a closer look.

To give a sense of how we understand the description 'socially relevant', here are the examples of themes and topics that we take it to include, listed by region.

Africa

Out of a total of 13 responses; 11 mentioned socially relevant themes. Not only is this a high number, but the socially relevant themes were prominent compared to others. Examples included:

- Politics: nationalism; armed struggle; peace processes; regional studies; mineral resources and their social impacts; democracy
- Language: language variation and identity; language policy (with multilingual populations)
- Development: religion and development; theatre for development; development versus conservation; gender and development; politics and development
- Culture: popular culture; performance studies; media
- Religion: the social role of religion; the role of the church in the process of democratisation; religion and development.

Other societal themes were: history and memory: globalisation: gender: identity: and public archaeology.

Asia

Of the 16 respondents, 13 of them mentioned socially relevant themes, such as:

- The environment: the protection of environment; animal welfare; agricultural ethics
- Culture: cultural exchange; cultural aspects of ethnic groups and traditional approaches to understanding; intra-Asia culture of actions
- Politics: political instability; the relationship between the people and government elites; politics and literature; globalisation and the role of the state; justice and conflicts
- Religion: religion and peace; politics, religion and literature; religion and globalisation; the study of Islam, especially the issue of secularism.

In addition, respondents mentioned: bioethics; gender; questions of ethnicity; and postcoloniality.

Australia

All four respondents mentioned socially relevant themes.

- Environmental humanities; food culture; sustainable food production

- Memory, especially in relation to war and conflict, e.g. in relation to Gallipoli
- Popular culture, especially radical culture.

Other themes mentioned include media; sexual ethics; and sport.

Europe and Russia

Of the 16 non-Russian European respondents, 10 mentioned socially relevant themes, as did eight out of the nine Russians. Examples being:

- Culture: history of popular culture and political culture; political and cultural anthropology, social history; cultural diversity (in comparison with biological diversity)
- Globalisation: transnational and international history; cultural interconnections; comparative studies, i.e. comparing the Ottoman with the Chinese, Russian and Mogul empires.
- Policy: philosophy of technology, bioethics, ethics in the public domain, social integration; humanities subjects that relate to economics, health sciences, social cohesion and interculturality
- Ideological transformation: in governance, mentalities and in the management of complexity and diversity
- Language: communication studies with social relevance, e.g. with respect to multiculturalism and immigration; bilingualism; the study of adults who learn a minority language
- Gender (property, sexuality): interplay between race, class, and gender, especially with regard to the situation of minorities.

In addition, the following themes were mentioned: political, social, and economic elites; history of crime and criminal justice; state building; space, place and displacement; Cold War studies; the relation between society and the media; environmental studies.

Latin America

Of the nine respondents from Latin America, seven mentioned socially relevant themes, including:

- Culture: cultural issues and identity; collective memory
- Public engagement: the status and role of humanities in relation to culture and society, e.g. philosophy and archaeology; developing the public face of the humanities

- Politics: political economy, specifically, the effects of newcomers to the International System, and how it might change the architecture of international regimes and institutions, and change the distribution of power; autonomy of the political and its bearing upon the authority of law, agency of political communities (e.g. particular or universal political communities)
- Justice: the authority and normativity of law; global justice; human rights; democracy; justice and war
- Religion: secularisation, laïcité, church–state relations
- Plurality: freedoms (civic and religious) and diversity; new challenges in a plural world; unity in a nation with a diverse population and a diversity of cultural expressions.

In addition respondents mentioned social movements in 20th century Latin America; and security.

The MENA region

All six respondents mentioned socially relevant themes. They included:

- Language: the relation between language variation and identity; language policy concerning multilingual populations
- Politics: political instability; the relationship between the people and government elites; globalisation and the role of the state; employment; refugees
- Religion: the study of Islam, especially on the issue of secularism.

Gender, identity, socialisation, family and ethnicity were also mentioned as research topics.

North America

Of the 16 respondents, 12 mentioned socially relevant themes. The main clusters were:

- Globalisation: the realm of the transnational; ‘looking at globalisation in a very localised kind of way – the local impacts of global process and the forms of resistance to uniformity’; projects with a globalised/hemispheric context; the re-emergence of China and India; religion and globalisation
- Health: bioethics; working with the clinical sphere to develop therapeutic approaches that embrace values, understanding and knowledge traditionally embedded within the humanities

- The public and private: looking at ongoing privatisation; at the diminishing role of public funding; at suspicion of governmental programmes; issues of privacy, surveillance and social media
- Environmental studies: protection of the environment; climate change; animal rights; food studies

In addition, the following themes were mentioned: cultural awareness; security and terror; human rights; violence/non-violence; gender studies.

To summarise, Table 3.1 lists the number and percentage of respondents by region who mentioned socially relevant themes.

These figures are striking (though it is also interesting that Europe is at the lower end of the scale.). They also fit well with some of the findings from Chapter 2, where we analysed respondents' views about the value of the humanities, often as expressed in public and even defensive contexts. Here we have been looking at what researchers say about their fields from the inside, out of the public gaze, but their views seem to be in tune with the more rhetorical statements about the justification of the humanities. Prevalent themes within academia resonate strongly with what is going on outside it. This helps to challenge the accusation, all too often heard, that the focus of humanities research is asocial and esoteric.

The methodological level: cross-fertilisation

Turning from the macro themes, let us now focus on the third category of responses to our question, which mentioned theoretical and

Table 3.1 Respondents who mentioned socially relevant themes

	Social themes mentioned	Number of respondents	Proportion as a %
Af	11	13	85
As	13	16	81
Aus	4	4	100
E	10	16	63
LA	7	9	78
MENA	6	6	100
NA	12	16	75
Ru	8	9	89
TOTAL	71	89	80

methodological trends. A significant number of respondents saw interdisciplinarity as a key trend in current research and, even more in future research, possibly resulting in breakthroughs. Respondents differed as far as the nature of interdisciplinary work was involved: sometimes they were thinking of research that reaches out to other humanities disciplines; sometimes to the social sciences; sometimes to STEM subjects. A total of 29 respondents made some reference to interdisciplinary research in this section of the questionnaire.

This figure is certainly interesting, but things become far more so if we allow ourselves to see interdisciplinarity as an instance of a wider tendency towards cross-fertilisation. Typically, an interdisciplinary researcher is someone who has been trained within the confines of a specific discipline, with its own professional and methodological norms, and then reaches out to another discipline, with all the risks, uncertainties and opportunities that this involves. But there are other forms of cross-fertilisation. A substantial number of respondents mentioned some form of intercultural or transnational comparison in their answers. Comparative work of this type is not necessarily interdisciplinary (as is usually understood). So comparative and interdisciplinary research should be treated as distinct concepts. As examples of comparative research, we found references to historians who compare two sets of phenomena in different parts of the world and at different periods, such as comparing the Roman and Ottoman empires. Sometimes this might overlap with the project of writing 'global history', where the different segments of history are pieced together into a single framework. Similarly, historians of political thought might compare two periods in different regions and at different times – one respondent cited the example of comparing the ideas of the French Revolution with contemporary Japanese political thought. Within the discipline of philosophy, respondents mentioned opportunities for comparative work between Eastern and Western philosophies; and within Western philosophy itself, the notorious divide between analytic and continental traditions offers opportunities for bridge-building and comparison, which two respondents thought a possible source of breakthroughs. Also, under this heading, we might include the idea of bringing philosophies of much older periods to bear on contemporary philosophical problems: medieval philosophy for modern philosophy of mind; ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy for contemporary ethics. All these are examples of comparative research given in interview responses.

Like interdisciplinary research, international or intercultural work can quickly shade into collaborative research, as it is perhaps best conducted

by building research teams across different countries (as noted by one of our Latin American respondents who works on secularisation and laïcité in different regions). Though distinct from one another, intercultural, transnational, interdisciplinary and collaborative research all fall under the heading of research cross-fertilisation. So we think we are justified in grouping them together, and in using this grouping to find a pattern in the answers about research themes.

In a similar vein, we found three other types of response that, taken on their own, would not seem statistically significant but become important once seen as part of this broader pattern. (1) Occasionally, respondents talked of research that works with local communities as an important category. Two archaeologists (from Brazil and Tanzania) and a historian (from Mozambique) fell into this category. Other respondents might have referred to such outreach later on in the questionnaire, under the heading of translation, but the point here is that these respondents linked such activities to dominant research trends. (2) Another case concerns researchers working with practitioners: two respondents from film studies (one from India, the other from Nigeria) underlined the importance of bringing together academic research and practice. (3) In the case of art history another example is working with museums, and through them the public, as opposed to pursuing research simply within academia. Note that all these cases are about conducting research, not (merely) communicating its results.

Putting all these categories together, we present the numbers in Table 3.2.¹

Table 3.2 Respondents pointing to the value of cross-fertilisation

	Interdisciplinary	Comparative	Public engagement	Practitioner engagement	Number of interviews
Af	4	2	3	1	13
As	4	4	1	1	16
Aus	2	0	0	0	4
E/Ru	11	3	0	1	25
LA	2	3	1	0	9
ME	2	2	0	0	6
NA	8	5	0	0	16
TOTAL	34	18	5	3	89

TOTAL: 60 out of 89, or 67%, of our interviewees mentioned some form of cross-fertilisation.

There are two further observations to make. (1) There was no significant disciplinary spread in these results – i.e. references to the different categories were spread evenly around the different fields. So we have not presented a table separating the results by discipline. (2) On the whole, respondents saw the trend towards cross-fertilisation in future themes or breakthroughs.

So, at a very high level of abstraction, we have seen how the majority of our respondents referred to some form of cross-fertilisation when it came to identifying research themes and trends.² It did not have to be this way. It would have been quite plausible for a respondent to claim that the dominant themes are those where researchers plough the mono-disciplinary furrow, confined within a traditional academic context and a specific time and period. Perhaps the best research results from mining ever more deeply in the seams already mapped out. Here is one response along these lines (Af10):

[What themes have been dominating your own field?] My theoretical orientation in linguistics tilts towards the functional-typological option. In my restricted specialisation of syntax, issues regarding grammaticalisation, language documentation, grammar writing, usage-based analyses are some of the themes. [What themes do you expect to dominate your field?] I expect these to continue for the next few years.

There is no reason, a priori, why the majority of our respondents should not have gone down this route. But they did not.

Interdisciplinarity, transnational research (internationalisation) and outreach to the public are among the main subjects of subsequent chapters. In them we shall ask questions about institutional conditions, such as whether they are being imposed on researchers against their will and how well they are being enabled or resourced. At this stage, we are merely pointing out that, on the basis of our interview results, researchers themselves already think that these are important sources of research themes – past, present and future – and in some cases that they will facilitate the most important breakthroughs.

Part II

We now turn to the question of whether humanities scholars see themselves as attempting to make discoveries and to advance knowledge, as is regularly supposed in the sciences, or whether their objective is

different, e.g. merely exploring new perspectives and ways of looking at familiar ideas and texts. The question is important in its own right, but a secondary reason for focusing on this issue concerns the public perception of the humanities. If the humanities conceive of themselves as fundamentally different from the sciences in this respect, policy makers and society at large may have a problem understanding just what researchers in the humanities do, and hence why they are worth supporting.

The interview questions

When we first started the interviews, the section entitled 'The nature of the humanities' consisted of the following questions:

What are the major similarities and dissimilarities between the humanities and the sciences in the ways they conduct and present research?

Could you give some examples (up to three) of important findings gained in the humanities?

Aside from your own views, how do you think the humanities are perceived in this respect?

What impact does the perception of the humanities in comparison to the sciences have on funding?

We conducted 38 interviews using these questions, mainly from Asia, Europe and the US. Some interviewees did not respond to one or other question in the cluster. When this happened, it was usually impossible to know whether the respondent was being absent-minded, tired, impatient, or whether they were being deliberately evasive. Nonetheless, most respondents did answer all the questions, so we had a good number to work with.

Our use of the word findings in the second question produced some interesting reactions. Given that this is a word less often associated with the humanities than with the natural and social sciences, the question might seem provocative. In the event, some interviewees simply went along with the question and gave examples. From this, one is entitled to assume that they had no problem with the use of the term findings in the humanities, or at least that we have no evidence to say that they objected to it. Other respondents queried the term and others explicitly objected to it. This then gave us further evidence for how they conceived of the difference between the humanities and the sciences.

Looking at those who queried or rejected the term, we asked ourselves why. One possibility was that a respondent objected to the term because they thought the humanities do not make discoveries or attain new knowledge. An alternative was that a respondent does think the humanities make discoveries and attain new knowledge, no less than the sciences do, but that they do not like to use the term findings to describe it. In this case, the issue may be more semantic than epistemological. In the responses we received to this question, we could usually tell what attitude interviewees took to the use of the term findings. Where they did have reservations, it was normally clear whether this was merely a semantic worry or whether it betrayed a deeper epistemological position about knowledge and the humanities. But to avoid the risk of any future uncertainty, roughly halfway through the interview process we decided to change the question slightly and separate out the two issues of whether the respondents conceived of the humanities as progressing in terms of knowledge and whether they objected to the use of the term findings.

So, across the next 51 interviews, we revised this section of the questionnaire to:

What, in broad terms, are the major similarities and dissimilarities between the humanities and the sciences in the ways they conduct and present research?

Please give up to three examples of things that, due to humanities research, we know today that we did not know before, either in your own field or in the humanities in general.

Do you think it is appropriate to describe the results of humanities research as findings?

What impact does the public perception of the humanities in this respect have on funding?

In other words, we were now asking directly what people thought of the use of the term findings, and distinguishing this question from the broader issue of whether they conceive of the humanities as knowledge directed.

Looking at all the responses to this section of the questionnaire (in both versions), we found an enormous amount of material to analyse. But, for the purposes of this chapter, we focus on the respondents' epistemological assumptions and attitudes, as evidenced mainly by their answers to the questions about findings and knowledge. (There are other

issues about the relation between humanities and the sciences that are not so obviously epistemological, such as the role of collaboration and the use of quantitative methods, but we shall not discuss these here.) In the last section we turn to issues about public perception of the humanities, looking at the respondents' views and then drawing some conclusions of our own.

Reactions to the term 'findings'

In this section, we survey all the interview responses to gauge their reaction to the notion of findings in the humanities. When considering the first batch of interviews (38) we make inferences purely from the way they responded to the question: 'could you give some examples (up to three) of important findings gained in the humanities?' If the respondent simply gives some examples, we take that to imply that they accept the notion of findings in the humanities; if they stop to question the term, it is usually possible to say whether they are strongly negative, mildly negative or mixed, in the sense that they think the term is appropriate in some contexts of humanities research but not in others. With the second batch of interviews (based on the new question), the task of gauging respondents' reactions to findings is simpler, since we asked outright what they thought of the term.

With all the interviews, we have attempted to divide their reactions into the following categories:

- clearly/strongly *negative*
- mixed, but *mildly negative*
- *mixed* (ambivalent), but not taking a normative position either way
- mixed, but *mildly positive*
- clearly/strongly *positive*

The following are examples of each category:

Negative: 'I don't think it's the function of the humanities to establish findings. We don't use those terms. We talk more about insights, perspectives and points of view. We don't talk in that quite definitive way about findings and measurable outcomes.' (NA10)

Mildly negative: 'The difference [between the sciences and the humanities] lies in the fact that establishing findings cannot be obligatory for the humanities. That would change its essentially creative and fluid character. One cannot deny that a great deal of self-indulgent

work happens in the humanities, but the answer to that cannot be a scientific demand for findings.’ (As2)³

Mixed: ‘Well, there are findings and there are other issues to do with reports and inferences.’ (Af4)

Mildly positive: ‘I do not have problems with the word “findings”. It depends how you describe the word in your research.’ (As13)

Positive: ‘Yes! The humanities produce objective findings that are arrived at through a systematic process of study of specific phenomena.’ (Af3)

Using this classification we can divide up the answers, as in Table 3.3, separated by region.⁴

If we group the *positives* and the *mildly positives* together, and similarly with the *negatives*, we can see that 35 respondents were positive about findings, and 26 were negative (around 40% and 29% of our sample respectively).

We now turn to the reasons given for the *negative* responses.

- Some rejected the findings terminology on the grounds that it excludes functions distinctive to humanities research, that it is about values, or interpretation or appreciation. For instance:

NA8: No findings, not in general. In classics, there are some examples of a different model. In philology – study of texts – we do have findings. They are generally wrapped up in careful editing of texts in which you find the best reading for ancient work. Sometimes these readings involve making new discoveries and emending texts

Table 3.3 Reactions to the term ‘findings’

	Negative	Mildly negative	Mixed	Mildly positive	Positive	n/c
Af	3	3	1	0	4	2
As	3	2	2	6	1	2
Aus	1		1		2	
E/Ru	0	4	3	7	5	6
LA		2	1	2	1	3
ME	2	0	0	0	2	2
NA	5	1	2	3	2	3
TOTAL	14	12	10	18	17	18

n/c = no comment.

in sometimes quite a dramatic way because you have established a better way of looking at an original work. That is what I would call scientific research. It is not just interpretative or appreciative. It is fundamental scientific work.

But these responses are not evidence that these interviewees deny their research is truth seeking since one can have true or false judgements about values, interpretation and appreciation.

- Three respondents reacted against the word findings because they thought humanities research lacks finality. For instance:

As3: Not if the findings are to be taken as the final word of wisdom. All findings in the humanities are provisional and subject to questioning and clarification and change and modification and dialogue and conversation.

Of course, since researchers in the natural and social sciences would also admit that their findings are subject to revision, this point should not be used to drive a wedge between the humanities and the sciences.

- Perhaps two respondents took a stronger ‘anti-objectivist’⁵ stance, saying that the humanities (only?) look for new perspectives. For instance:

ME4: Do the humanities have findings? In the exact sciences they have discoveries; in our fields we can discover a new way of thinking about a subject matter. There have been discoveries but, on the whole in the humanities, we discover new ways of thinking about existing ideas or texts; we find ways of reading something differently. But one does so scientifically; one needs to know what’s been said before and understand it in an organised way. One needs arguments; one needs to form hypotheses and to demonstrate them.

When we looked at respondents who were *mildly negative* about the term findings, we found no clear pattern in the reasons given. Only three could be construed as making a gesture towards some form of anti-objectivism:

As4: Instead of findings, I should rather call them as ‘subjective perception/understanding’.

As for the remaining responses in this category, there were no patterns detectable in their reasons. One European reiterated the point found in

some US *negative* responses that the humanities involve (critical) interpretation, which cannot be described in terms of findings. But in the other *mildly negative* responses, all gave different reasons, which do not crop up elsewhere.

Knowledge

Do the humanities advance knowledge?

As indicated above, after conducting 38 interviews we changed the section on the nature of the humanities, replacing the request for three examples of findings with the following:

Please give up to three examples of things that, due to humanities research, we know today that we did not know before, either in your own field or in the humanities in general.

We were interested to see what would happen once respondents were asked to give examples in, what we considered, a less provocative way. Following on from the previous discussion, you might expect that respondents would not have a problem talking simply in terms of advances in knowledge. As we saw, very few objected to the term findings because it implied that the humanities, like the sciences, seek knowledge.

This expectation was justified. Of the 40 responses we had to this new question, 35 were happy to answer on the assumption that the humanities advance knowledge and 11 made no comment. But we cannot infer anything from this, we cannot say that they were evading the question (and therefore tacitly suspicious of knowledge claims in the humanities), they may simply have been distracted or fatigued. By way of a more detailed breakdown, Table 3.4 lists by region those who went along with the request for examples of knowledge.

Table 3.4 Answers to the question 'Do the humanities advance knowledge?'

	Accepted	Rejected	Mixed
Af	8	0	0
As	7	1	1
Aus	2	0	0
E/Ru	8	0	1
LA	6	0	1
ME	1	0	0
NA	3	1	0
TOTAL	35	2	3

Two respondents who rejected the terms of the question said:

As3: I do think that this runs counter to our sense of the humanities as a dynamic discipline, and we should refuse to answer such queries because it puts the humanities in competition with, and defensive about, the knowledge that is generated by the sciences. Of course, we know much that we did not know before because of humanities research, but the most important lesson we have from the humanities is that we can still keep thinking about what we know, and see if we can unknow it, unravel it in some way, or build upon it.

NA13: I feel that the question itself is biased. This is based on science or social science model of 'discovery.' Humanities research enables us to understand how value systems in our society are generated.

The important point is that they were the only ones who reacted negatively to the new question. If our sample of interviewees is representative, it would seem that, in general, humanities scholars do not oppose the idea that their fields are truth seeking and do not reject the idea that they work towards, and indeed achieve, knowledge.

Breakthroughs

We now turn to a related issue about the nature of the humanities, that of whether our respondents think there are breakthroughs in humanities research. As discussed in Part I of this chapter, we asked our respondents to comment on breakthroughs in another section of the questionnaire, under the heading of 'major research themes', when, after questions about recent and emerging research themes, we asked them:

Where do you see the potential breakthroughs in your field?

In Part I we drew on these answers to see where respondents thought there might be breakthroughs. But now our interest is more epistemological. Just as with our question about findings later on in the questionnaire, the question about breakthroughs might seem provocative. It simply assumes that there are breakthroughs in the humanities. So, as with findings, we left it up to the respondents either to accept the terms of the question and give examples, or to challenge them and thereby reveal their own assumptions about the nature of the humanities. It is from this perspective that we now wish to look at the responses.

The answers broke down into the following respondents who:

- accepted the notion of breakthroughs, and gave examples
- accepted the notion of breakthroughs, but thought that there would not be any in their field (= mixed)
- disputed the application of breakthroughs to the humanities in principle
- made no comment: some did not answer the question, which may have been because the interviewer did not press it. There is no case where the respondent's failure to answer can confidently be read as a refusal to engage with the notion of breakthroughs.

Table 3.5 lists the results by region and worldwide (out of a total of 89).

It is noticeable that those who accepted the notion of breakthroughs in the humanities far outnumbered the sceptics. But since there are some sceptics it may be useful to indicate in outline what they said.

Two respondents made the very similar point that, although we should not talk in terms of breakthroughs, we should talk of discoveries:

NA8: I don't think breakthrough is a term that fits very well in the humanities, particularly in the classics, given the nature of the material. But we do see new discoveries being made all the time. For example, there have been some very exciting discoveries made in the field of ancient reading. These discoveries illustrate how oral techniques and reading techniques merged for a while, before reading became a thing done with just the eyes. So that would be one example.

NA6: I'll start with the breakthrough issue....To take the narrative frame of breakthroughs, inventions, and innovations that fits the sciences very well and reframe the discourse under the word

Table 3.5 Answers to the question 'Do the humanities produce breakthroughs?'

	Accepted	Disputed	Mixed	n/c
Af	7	2	0	4
As	9	0	1	6
Aus	2			2
E	6	4	0	6
LA	5	0	0	4
ME	1	1	3	1
NA	6	5	1	4
Ru	6		1	2
TOTAL	42	12	6	29

discovery rather than breakthrough. The thesis is that the humanities are as important as any of the other disciplines in that they expand the horizons of human discoveries. If you think about the grand challenges – energy and water shortage and food – both have a natural and human cause and effect. We need not only the STEM sciences but also the humanities, the cultural sciences.

In other words, they did not want their rejection of breakthrough terminology to be linked to anti-objectivism. Another respondent replaced breakthrough terminology with reinterpretation:

E13: In the humanities we're not so much concerned with discovering new stuff, the content is already there. The task is to find new methods of engaging with it. People take their questions from the world around them and use them to reinterpret works from the past. For a good example, look at the Globe Shakespeare project, which brings people from all over the world to perform and present their own perspectives on his plays.

These were in fact the only respondents who rejected talk of breakthroughs outright. If we turn to the other sceptics, we see that they were all milder. Some (two from history, two from literature) sounded sceptical about breakthroughs, but became more optimistic as they went on:

E15: To me the idea of a breakthrough seems to make more sense in the sciences than in the humanities. But in my field, perhaps something like a breakthrough will come through intercultural comparison, e.g. with China, which has its own classical culture.

Finally, there were some who seemed to allow for the possibility of breakthroughs in principle, but didn't think their field was going to yield them (in the near future):

ME3: I don't foresee any breakthroughs in philosophy. That's not to say there aren't breakthroughs in the subject, but that you can't predict them. An example of a breakthrough is Rawls, but it takes time for people to absorb such work. If there are breakthroughs they will come as a result of the international environment of philosophical research.

There seems to be no pattern to the discipline of the sceptics. True, the staunchest two were from linguistics, but other than that it is difficult to associate scepticism about breakthroughs with any particular discipline.

Perception of the humanities

We now return to the section of the questionnaire about the nature of the humanities. In the final part of this section, we asked respondents for their views about the public perception of the humanities. Specifically, we wanted to know what effects they thought the public perception of the humanities had on funding. In the first version of the questionnaire we asked:

And what impact does the perception of the humanities in comparison to the sciences have on funding?

In the second we altered the question to:

What impact does the public perception of the humanities in this respect have on funding?

(By 'this respect' we were referring to the issue tackled in the other questions in this section, about examples of knowledge gains and the question of whether the humanities produce findings.)

Almost all those who responded to this question were negative; only three answers showed any optimism. As to the reasons for such pessimism, about half the pessimists thought the diagnosis quite straightforward, since the sciences are perceived as being more useful than the humanities they get more funding. The utility at issue varied slightly. Many respondents talked about technology, referring to engineering benefits or to medicine. Others were more general. Among the African respondents (and only among them) there were references to development (Af6, Af9, and Af10). Some of the US respondents (NA1, NA8, and NA10) talked in terms of employability, a theme not explicitly mentioned in any other region. A few made the point that much of scientific research is not actually useful and is also threatened by the utilitarian attitudes of policy makers.

When we set the question, we actually had a different point in mind. Our hypothesis was that public attitudes and hence funding are adversely affected by the perception that the humanities do not advance knowledge as the sciences do. Six respondents did take up this hint, and agreed (four of these are among those who embrace an anti-realist conception of the humanities), for example:

NA1: I think it would be problematic and self-defeating to adopt that language [sc. of findings]....Admittedly, it makes defending the humanities harder if you can't point to important findings or discoveries.

Of course one can say that, if the public think the humanities do not advance knowledge, *a fortiori*, they think the humanities do not advance useful or relevant knowledge for society. But those of our respondents who made the utilitarian point did not make this more complex argument. Their point was simpler, whether or not the public and policy makers think humanities research produces knowledge and findings, they don't think the results are useful to society.

What is the solution to this problem of perception? Although the humanities do produce concrete benefits to society (more often than is often acknowledged), they do it in a different way from some technology disciplines. So we should articulate the specific benefit we do produce, even if it is more gradual and less obvious than in other research fields. Here, it is useful to quote one of the few respondents who struck a more optimistic tone in this part of the questionnaire:

E2: To be sure, many people see the humanities as impractical and irrelevant. But there are also many people with a profound interest in history, literature, arts, philosophy, etc. who appreciate our work. We need to make a more sustained effort to reach out to our non-expert audiences. In sum, I do not think that the public perception of the humanities is particularly negative in Germany and that we have problems acquiring funding because of negative stereotypes. I realise that many colleagues habitually raise such complaints but there is nothing new about this self-image as underappreciated scholars.

Many humanities scholars already make an effort to reach out, a point we shall discuss further in Chapter 5 on translation, but there is a dimension we feel it important to add here. Before the public can appreciate the full value of the humanities they need to understand more clearly what we do. But how effective are humanities scholars at explaining the outcomes of their research? In their answers to the question about the value of the humanities mentioned at the end of the last chapter, two North American respondents (NA7 and NA10) complained that humanities research can be too esoteric and ridden with jargon. Perhaps we should be better equipped to give crisp examples of research outcomes that support the different roles or values discussed in the previous chapter. Again, we acknowledge that some humanities scholars already do this, often unsupported by their institutions. If this readiness and ability were more widely shared, perhaps it would do something to counteract the negative impression of the humanities as described by one respondent:

NA11: In America, the humanities are perceived as fluff: in universities, high schools and grammar schools.

Conclusion

Most of the respondents converged on these points:

- They identify socially relevant themes as being prominent in humanities research (though less so among the European interviewees).
- They identify cross-fertilisation, especially interdisciplinarity and collaboration, as a way forward.
- They believe that the humanities produce knowledge, most agree that breakthroughs may be identified but they are divided in their views on the concept of findings.
- They were pessimistic as to how society perceives and values the humanities.

Building on the conclusions of Chapters 2 and 3 it is clear that stereotypes of humanities scholars as removed from the world, only too content to live in their ivory towers and unable to relate to real-world problems, do not conform with how humanists themselves perceive their role and value. While there may be widespread scepticism among academics about how their insights are valued and taken up by politicians, and perhaps society at large, it is clear that many researchers see a social value in their knowledge and want to engage and have an impact on the world. There is a sense of disconnection and lack of bridge-building rather than an unwillingness to engage. Such problems will inform later chapters but first we need to investigate how humanities knowledge is being impacted by digital technologies.



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