Distinguished Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a conversation with his secretary Eckermann, the great German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe mentioned a Chinese novel he had just been reading. Eckermann's reaction was: "Chinese novel! [...] that must look strange enough." Goethe responded: "Not so much as you might think [...] the Chinamen think, act, and feel almost exactly like us; and we soon find that we are perfectly like them, excepting that all they do is more clear, more pure, and decorous than with us." The poet stressed that the Chinese could already look back on a long tradition of novel writing, already at a time when – I quote – "our forefathers were still living in the woods." Goethe considered poetry to be "the universal possession of mankind" and was convinced that – I quote – "national literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and every one must strive to hasten its approach."

At the time of the Enlightenment, the European elite took a great interest in China. Chinese art was purchased for royal collections. Chinese technology was used in the famous porcelain factories of Meissen. Chinese thinking influenced European intellectuals such as Leibniz and Voltaire. During the French Revolution the Confucian principle, "Do not do to others what you do not want to be done to yourself," was absorbed into the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

When the National Museum in Beijing reopened in April 2011, the first exhibition shown was entitled "The Art of the Enlightenment". This exhibition featured about 580 paintings, sculptures, and other objects from Germany's three biggest state collections at Dresden, Munich, and Berlin. It marked the culmination of an increasing cultural interchange between the two countries. However, the controversy surrounding that exhibition also highlighted that the En-
lightenment is perceived differently in Germany and China. To put it in a nutshell: Whereas the German perception focusses on the liberalizing and democratizing nature of the Enlightenment, in China it is mainly perceived as a time of reasoning and scientific innovation.\(^8\)

In a lecture on “Humanism as the Theme of Chinese Modernity” the Chinese intellectual Wang Hui stressed that there are three different Chinese words used to translate the English word “humanism”.\(^9\) Each of these words has its own history and connotations. This example illustrates that true cultural transfer needs more than just translation – it needs room for dialogue, mutual learning, and research-based explanation.

I am thus delighted to participate in this truly transnational dialogue on the role of the humanities in a globalized world, last but not least in view of China’s rise to superpower status, also in the field of higher education and research.

The topic I want to address today is very close to my heart, not only as a scholar but also in my daily work at the Volkswagen Foundation, Germany’s largest private funder of higher education and research which puts a strong emphasis on supporting research in the humanities and social sciences. What I shall offer is a brief personal view of the current state and future perspectives of the humanities as I perceive them from a European point of view. Nevertheless I will try to widen the scope by also looking at the quite sharp variations of the ways in which the humanities are perceived and valued, in the level of sources of funding, the richness of the archives, the nature of the institutions, and the agendas of the respective researchers. Although I begin with a brief recognition of national and continental differences and am fully aware of the difficulties to draw general conclusions, I nevertheless want in the last part of my talk to sketch some shared matters of concern, and the possibility of a common approach to them.

I. Expectations, Threads, and Opportunities: The Humanities in a State of Crisis

In one of his Elizabeth Costello-Lessons the South African writer and Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee talks about “The Humanities in Africa”, and he particularly addresses some of the challenges the Christian as well as the Hellenistic traditions in the humanities are confronted with in an African environment. To be more specific, Elizabeth Costello’s sister Blanche


(when she is being awarded an honorary doctorate at a South-African University) confronts
the audience with her analysis of the developments over the past 500 years. She blames the
universities for having lost the humane part of what was once called “studia humanitatis” and
having reduced the scope of humane studies to “textual scholarship”\(^{10}\). Blanche concludes
her short speech by stating: “The *studia humanitatis* have taken a long time to die, but now,
at the end of the second millennium of our era, they are truly on their deathbed. All the more
bitter should be that death, I would say, since it has been brought about by the monster en-
throned by those very studies as first and animating principle of the universe: The monster of
reason, mechanical reason”\(^{11}\).

Blanche’s speech leaves the audience somewhat puzzled and causes numerous angry reac-
tions such as “Who does she think she is?” or “A missionary from the sticks in Zululand –
what does she know about the humanities?”\(^{12}\). Even at the subsequent formal luncheon
hardly anyone likes to speak to Blanche. It is only her sister Elizabeth Costello that manages
to talk to Professor Peter Godwin who remains convinced that the humanities “remain the
core of any university”\(^{13}\). Godwin’s complacency causes Elizabeth Costello to defend her
sister’s position by stating: “Wasn’t she saying something more interesting, more challenging
– that there has been something misconceived in the study of the humanities from the start?
Something wrong with placing hopes and expectations on the humanities that they could
never fulfill?”\(^{14}\)

The formative, humane and civilizing function of the humanities even nowadays is seen as
one of the most important reasons for providing opportunities to study them in depth at our
universities. At the same time more and more doubts are being raised about the approach
taken by the humanities themselves as well as threads articulated to which the humanities
are being exposed in an environment that has rapidly changed over the past two decades.
As far as I can gather from having looked at the literature as well as from having talked to
colleagues from various universities across the United States, there seem to be rising con-
cerns also in this country about the more or less universal trend to cut away the humanities
and the arts, and to shift resources from these domains to apparently more profitable sub-
jects in science and engineering. Martha C. Nussbaum in her book “Not for Profit. Why De-
mocracy Needs the Humanities” clearly stresses this point: “Thirsty for national profit, na-
tions, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 123.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 124.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 125.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 125.
keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize traditions, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance.”

Martha Nussbaum presents several examples of institutions and conferences around the world where in recent years the humanities, the arts, and critical thinking were left aside in favor of focusing on “profit-making strategies”. She criticizes the predominant, all too narrow focus on economic growth, and argues in favor of developing a concept of global citizenship that involves a broadly based training in the humanities way beyond the usual facts and figures about foreign parts of the world. For her responsible citizenship requires among others: “The ability to assess historical evidence, to use and think critically about economic principles, to assess accounts of social justice, to speak a foreign language, to appreciate the complexities of the major world religions. The factual part alone could be to pervade without the skills and techniques we have come to associate with the humanities. But a catalogue of facts, without the ability to assess them, or to understand how a narrative is assembled from evidence is almost as bad as ignorance, since the pupil will not be able to distinguish ignorance stereotypes pervaded by politicians and cultural leaders from the truth or bogus claims from valid ones. World history and economic understanding, then, must be humanistic and critical if they are to be at all useful in forming intelligent citizens, and they must be taught alongside the study of religion and of philosophical theories of justice. Only then will they supply a useful foundation for the public debates that we must have if we are to cooperate in solving major human problems.”

Cultivating critical thinking and imagination as well as training suitable “citizens of the world” do not seem to be objectives that are widely shared among the current university leadership. In today’s market-driven, rankings-, and ratings-obsessed world of higher education even the status of university professors in the humanities appears to be threatened. Frank Donoghue in his book “The Last Professors. The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities” provides a wide array of facts, statistics, and other data underpinning his view that the growing corporate culture of higher education undermines some of the most fundamental values of the university, in particular by erasing one of its defining features: the tenured professor. According to Donoghue, fewer than 30% of college and university teachers are tenured or on tenure tracks. Donoghue particularly criticizes the humanities themselves for making too many concessions to corporate values. He argues “that the market categories of productivity,
efficiency, and competitive achievement, not intelligence or erudition, already drive professional advancement in the academic world, even in the humanities. Today’s professors have, in other words, internalized the very standards that have traditionally been used to attack them. The most crucial aspects of academic careers – surviving graduate school, finding an academic job in the humanities, and running in the publication race that now determines tenure decisions – have the effect of turning budding scholars into sales people.”  

If we turn for a moment to the German scene, we will have no difficulty in identifying similar criticisms and complaints. Just a few quotations may suffice to illustrate that humanities scholars feel heavily stressed and neglected by their university leadership as well as by politicians. They consider themselves totally underfunded, and they complain about being at a disadvantage when it comes to applying for large sums of money at the respective funding agencies. The quotations run as follows:

- “In many subject areas of the humanities one is already standing up against the wall. In some areas further cuts will immediately lead to their exitus.”  
- “The humanities suffer from an ideological curse expressed in 1959 by Charles Percy Snow, physicist, novelist and high-ranking British civil servant when he coined the phrase of the two cultures, the scientific and the humanistic (literary) culture. He rather did it in passing, in a kind of Sunday sermon with an enormous impact, in particular on the humanities. This impact may indeed not tell us a lot about the truthfulness of Snow’s concept but rather about the nervousness and the lack of self-esteem which has its firm grip on the humanities.”  
- „Jacob is yearning for a research scholarship (or at least a sabbatical) that allows him to get rid of his work in the library which he very much dislikes” (p. 338), and “Wilhelm subsequently cultivates his disrespect for the students. Mediocrity is spreading everywhere.”

The last quotations – from Steffen Martus’ book published in 2013 – refer to, as no doubt some of you will have recognized, the Brothers Grimm. This clearly shows that complaining about students, their competence and commitment, as well as trying to get rid of one’s institutional duties is at least about 200 years old. The only more or less up-to-date quotation just

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18 Fortune University Press, 2008, p. XVI.
read out to you is the first one from the eminent classics scholar and former president of the German Institute of Archaeology, Hans-Joachim Gehrke, and it was published in the Journal of the German Research Association in 2008. The comments on C. P. Snow and his impact on the humanities are by the quite well-known German philosopher Jürgen Mittelstraß, and they were written already in the 1980s, almost at the same time when the philosopher Odo Marquard in his famous speech at the annual meeting of the then still West-German Rectors Conference claimed that the humanities should be much more aware of their “unavoidability” (Unvermeidlichkeit) and in particular be prepared to compensate those effects of science and technology which he calls “the downside of modernity”, or even “damages done by modernization” (Modernitätsschäden). In a nutshell, Odo Marquard expressed his view in the following sentence: “The more modern the modern world becomes, the more unavoidable (or indispensable – W. K.) will be the humanities” (p. 98).

Whilst Marquard wanted to stimulate an intellectual debate about the historical preconditions of the complex presence and complicated future as well as the inter-, and often transdisciplinary approaches necessary to build bridges between the two cultures, many of his colleagues are still behaving according to the following motto: “I’m a philosopher, I have a problem for every solution.” Occasionally even a sense of arrogance prevails, just like the well-known scholar of romance literature Professor Ernst Robert Curtius who once refused to take an offer for a professorship by the quite famous Technical University of Aachen (Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule). He declined the offer with the following words: “At the RWTH I will be in danger of meeting perhaps one morning the professor for heating and air-conditioning, and he may even want to address me as his ‘dear colleague’.”

What all of this shows is that in the humanities the mood of the respective researchers is oscillating between on the one hand a lot of self-confidence, a certain degree of complacency, and at times even arrogance whilst on the other hand feelings of neglect, disrespect, and even fears of unfriendly takeovers by other disciplines prevail. Under such circumstances the specific abilities and competences of the humanities get lost. It is about time to rethink and reconfigure the specific strengths, opportunities, and perspectives the humanities can bring to the table when we try to confront issues related to social, cultural, or technological change and the intricacies of globalization. The humanities will only succeed in this endeavor if they can build bridges across cultures and continents, last but not least based on the conviction that it is necessary to be aware of the others, of the past, and of the path dependencies of our present day lives if we want to responsibly shape the future.
II. To Interpret, to Explain, or to Provoke – How can the Humanities Realize their Potential?

Anyone who wants to talk about the humanities as a whole must be aware of the fact that he or she has to deal with an incredibly wide cosmos consisting of numerous stars, several milky-ways, and a lot of different planets whose complexities can never be fully grasped and adequately described. With respect to my topic and its main reference point, the situation within our research universities, I should like to focus on three main functions, or domains of the humanities which – in order to keep things simple! – I should like to link to the following terms: to interpret, to explain, and to provoke.

‘To interpret’ or to understand (the German term is ‘verstehen’) became the central category of the humanities in the course of the 19th century, at least in the sense of the German term “Geisteswissenschaften”. According to Wilhelm Dilthey (as outlined in his book on “Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften”) to understand, or to interpret things is closely linked to self-reflection, to moving from the outside world towards the inner world, and thus clearly to distinguish the approach taken by the humanities from the empirical and lab-based ones of science and engineering. Closely connected to Dilthey’s concept is the so-called ‘memoria function’ of the humanities, the right to interpretation, and the art of cultivating a hospitable imagination that enables us to fully engage with multiple others in the world, and to push us to continually problematize the boundaries of our openness towards the other, historically or geographically biased as it may be. Interpretation allows us to read things “against the grain”. It almost always contains a speculative element, in particular with respect to what we cannot or do not know, what is hidden to us, and what needs to be added in order to provide opportunities for intellectual debates.

‘To explain’ or to verify the subject matter to be studied has been at the forefront of some of the humanities and most of the social sciences almost throughout the entire 20th century. But for the humanities there were only a few disciplines that relied heavily on field work, surveys, lab-based research, etc. It is a relatively new feature that – at least in the Central European debate, the term “Geisteswissenschaften” has been replaced by “Kulturwissenschaften” (Cultural Studies) in order to indicate that their research approach is very different from the hermeneutic approaches traditionally taken in the philological disciplines. More recently, the digitization of the humanities (to which I will return later on) has triggered an enormous array of new approaches ranging from close collaborations between computer scientists and the humanities all the way through to joint projects with people whose background is in cognitive and neurosciences. These opportunities of making use of large quantities of data have al-
ready triggered the establishment of a new Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics located at Frankfurt am Main (and headed by Winfried Menninghaus).

‘To provoke’ or to irritate, perhaps even to disturb or disrupt traditional views may sound to some of you quite strange with respect to the role of the humanities. But I think it is essential that we become aware of this important remit, in particular when we try to responsibly shape our common future. It is essential that intellectuals with a firm basis in at least some domains of the humanities engage in critical reflection or proactive thinking (the German term is “vorbeugendes Nachdenken”) in order to question our common wisdom, and sometimes even to be a thorn in the flesh of all too common place reflections uttered in the media. One quite prominent example in the German context is the most recent publication by Thomas Nagel entitled: “Geist und Kosmos – Warum die materialistisch-neodarwinistische Konzeption der Natur so gut wie sicher falsch ist” which has already been named the most “hated academic book of the year”. In this case protagonists of evolutionary biology are particularly challenged by a philosopher! These critical, thought-provoking contributions by humanistic scholars are quite often not welcomed by scientists and engineers. For instance in the context of our funding initiative “Key Issues for Academia and Society” I am often confronted with criticisms, e.g. from neuroscientists, when they jointly work on addressing questions concerning the way we remember things, or why we can rightly assume that there is something like a free will. Often they are not pleased with the approach taken by the humanistic scholars who make things more complex or even turn them upside down: “Things are as yet not getting easier when humanistic scholars come to the table” is a phrase often used.

Philological, historical, or philosophical approaches are often driven by close interactions between the subject and the object, the ones who try to understand and interpret, and the things to be interpreted. The philosopher Theodor Litt\footnote{In his book “Individuum und Gemeinschaft. Grundlegung der Kulturphilosophie. Leipzig and Berlin 1926.} particularly emphasized the importance of the will to be involved in shaping the future when it comes to analyzing the present and its historical preconditions. According to Litt, it is essential that the respective scholar approaches the objects of study in an unbiased, impartial, perhaps even objective manner, an approach “full of self-denial” – or in German: To adhere to the “entsagungsvolle Sachlichkeit ihres Strebens”\footnote{Ibid., p. 413.}. The ability and the willingness to know more about the object of a study needs to be closely associated with a firm basis in contemporary life. Otherwise we will end up with a lot of mindless and meaningless notes: “Das Leben, dessen das Subjekt hier
kundig werden will – es muss in ihm selbst pulsieren, oder es wird nichts weiter herauskommen als seelenloser Notizenkram."24

In view of the opportunities as well as the limits and limitations of humanistic studies, it is essential that we confront ourselves with the interpretive, explanatory, and provocative functions in each case. Most of the questions we are confronted with in our globalized world cannot be solved without making use of inter-, or transdisciplinary approaches. These, of course, are difficult to plan, to resource, and they often cause a lot of headaches for university leaders as well as heads of funding institutions. Nevertheless, it is a necessity for all of us to try to provide preconditions for these ambitious endeavors to successfully cope with the complex realities of an increasingly multipolar and interconnected world at the beginning of the 21st century.

Achieving groundbreaking insights is not just a matter of coincidence. It requires a research-friendly, high trust environment which also provides adequate room for transdisciplinary as well as transnational communication and cooperation. New ideas or insights often come about through seeing things differently. As if one were to see them in another light or with the eyes of someone else. Furthermore, it is important to find the right balance between a sufficient degree of diversity of disciplines and the most intense degree of communicative interaction among the scholars involved. If the institution is too small and homogeneous in orientation, then the potential for extradisciplinary stimulation will be missing. If the institution is too large and heterogeneous, then there are hardly any opportunities for personal contacts and content fertility. Narrow disciplinary focus often leads to monotony; all-encompassing breadth transforms such a degree of diversity into unproductive heterogeneity. In both extremes intellectual creativity is ultimately stimulated, and along with it the generation of transformative knowledge. For a funder like the Volkswagen Foundation this implies that we more and more focus on supporting people in such creative environments for the medium-, to longterm. This is for instance reflected in the so-called ‘Freigeist-Fellowships’ as well as the ‘Lichtenberg-Professorships’. In both cases we are ready to support those that come up with promising ideas for their future research for up to eight years. But with respect to stimulating new ideas with some unconventional components we are currently also soliciting a new approach in a kind of small grant scheme which will be addressing some sort of start-up grant for developing pilot projects that may not yet be ripe for further funding but hold promise for achieving something off the beaten track. The provisional title is “Original Thinking – In Search of Bold Ideas”.

24 Ibid., p. 413.
Thinking and working in terms of complex and possibly time-consuming endeavors is not favored by the current framework conditions for resource-allocation, at least not in Germany and other Central European countries. We all too often pursue a “we don’t trust you, we know better, and we want results now” kind of approach which extinguishes small flames of creativity, and certainly prevents them from turning into strong fires of transformative research. No doubt, the implementation of evaluation processes and assessment exercises at regular intervals has brought about not only a wealth of information about the respective unit of analysis but also initiated a lot of learning processes as well as numerous improvements. For many a rector or president of a university the results of such state-, or country-wide comparisons have been serving as eye-openers concerning the qualitative positioning the department or centre assessed. But if we look at the current situation of an almost ubiquitous array of monitorings, reviews, assessments, and evaluations, we cannot help but recognize that these various instruments in one way or another have fallen victim to their own success. Let me illustrate at least some of the weaknesses of these kinds of efficiency-oriented approaches to the concept of a modern university by referring to a quite different domain with the following anecdote, in this case referring to an analysis of Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony and the performing orchestra. The analysis of the concert summarized in five points by a specialist for streamlining public administration reads as follows:

“1. For large parts of the concert the oboists had nothing to do. Their part should be reduced, and their work is to be delegated to other members of the orchestra.
2. All of the 12 violinists played the same notes. This is an unnecessary duplication of effort. Therefore, this group should be drastically reduced. If it is really necessary to have a huge orchestral volume, electronic devices should be used to achieve the same effects.
3. It seems totally unnecessary that the horns were repeating the same notes which had just been played by the violinists.
4. If all repetitious elements were deleted, the concert could be reduced from about half an hour to four or five minutes.
5. Had Schubert been able to receive and follow this piece of advice, he surely would have been able to complete his (unfinished) symphony.”

III. The Challenges Provided by Digitization and Globalization

In our rapidly changing, increasingly globalized world, we are confronted with huge problems ranging from local wars and regional conflicts, mass migration, and terrorist attacks all the way through to earthquakes, pandemics, climate change, and financial instabilities. Many of these issues can only be dealt with in an adequate way through increasing our knowledge base. Universities as strongholds of research and training need to re-contextualize themselves and pay attention to the expectations of other stakeholders, their fears and anxieties as well as their hopes for results and solutions. At the same time the public at large, and politicians in particular, must acknowledge the fact that the search for fundamentally new insights operates under highly fragile, risky, and uncertain conditions. In many instances, the researchers cannot immediately deliver the straightforward answers, forecasts, or solutions we all would like to see so urgently. It takes a reliable, high trust mode of long-term funding for teaching and research in order to fully reap the fruits of scholarly explorations. Despite the many errors and failures that do occur in our universities, the answer cannot be to introduce ever more and ever tighter reporting and control mechanisms. To my mind we rather need a leap of faith based on high trust principles that allow us to thoroughly rethink common wisdom and to conduct research in unknown territories and off the beaten track areas. This particularly applies to the humanities and their contribution to dealing with the changes, challenges, and complexities of our multipolar world.

Indeed, the humanities can help to prevent us from taking an all too narrow perspective on issues such as digitization and globalization. They can also prevent us from considering these phenomena only in economic terms. Social and ethnic conflicts should not be overlooked. While on the one hand there is clearly a trend towards a worldwide acculturation and interlinkages, we can, on the other hand, also observe a growing tendency to erect walls against other cultures, against anything that appears “alien” or “foreign”, an attitude which often turns into hatred and open hostility. If attitudes are to be developed which enable fruitful contacts with what is at first sight perceived as alien or foreign, and thus facilitate a better understanding of what seems to be strange or unfamiliar, intercultural encounters and the comprehensions they engender must be better understood. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world the humanities have an important role to play. By opening up historical as well as cross-cultural perspectives they considerably enhance the reflexive capabilities of universities, research institutes, and the public at large. An impressive example of how this can be achieved by a bridge-building individual scholar has been presented by Mike Lützeler in many of his books and articles. It is most impressively summed up in his latest book “Transatlantische Germanistik. Kontakt, Transfer, Dialogik” (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013).
The past two decades have seen unprecedented transformations of political, economic, and technological systems. Across the world, the accelerating conversion of information and communication technologies is shifting the balance towards an almost ubiquitous and universal availability of anything, anywhere, any time. The rapid enhancement of electronic communication is not only affecting more and more aspects of our daily life, but it also changes the very nature of teaching and research. Whilst students can now access lectures and seminars given in other universities and use electronic textbooks, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), etc., researchers can also make efficient use of digitization by entering into large-scale, “big data” empirical research work which hitherto nobody even dared to dream of. These processes not only affect research work in areas like the human genome project or high energy physics which have always demanded large data storage capacities, but more and more we can also observe a tendency towards the digitization of knowledge production in the humanities. This opens up new perspectives and research opportunities which so far have not been fully explored. With new statistical methods and visualization techniques at hand, the collaborative work processes of humanities scholars are no longer primarily focusing on the creation of new knowledge but rather also on knowledge design. Moreover, the demand for large-scale, expensive infrastructures is no longer confined to science and engineering. Several of them have already transcended national borders. The following examples of European research infrastructures may suffice to illustrate this point:

- CLARIN – a research infrastructure to make language resources and technology available and useful to scholars of all disciplines;
- DARIAH – a digital infrastructure to study source materials in cultural heritage institutions;
- CENDARI – the collaborative European digital archive infrastructure;
- EHRI – the European Holocaust research infrastructure.

At a recent conference organized by the Volkswagen Foundation, Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Harvard) and several of his colleagues demonstrated the shift of emphasis from focusing on unique objects and biographical studies towards larger entities and patterns occurring in millions of objects. Some of this work is established on platforms such as CURARIUM or Harvard’s Arboretum where by means of QR codes the viewer enters into a quite new world of knowledge: the purpose is no longer to pass on established knowledge about each object but rather to enable individuals to produce additional knowledge by themselves.  

Jeffrey T. Schnapp: the digital approach ultimately is “about extending our cognitive faculties and social existences; new ways to analyze and experience the past in the present; new ways to work, think, share, and enjoy; new ways to make things, even tradition-bound things like scholarly books.”

Perhaps, not surprisingly for some of you, this concept of self-activation of scholars, visitors, and students echoes well with the classical concept of a modern university as expressed in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s, the Brothers Grimm’s and von Savigny’s writings. They all focus on the formation of scholars and future leaders for various walks of society as something which is closely connected to activating their sense of creative and critical thinking. Basically Wilhelm von Humboldt’s concept rested on four pillars:

- the integration of teaching and research;
- the complementary principles of Lehrfreiheit (freedom to teach) and Lernfreiheit (freedom to study);
- the demand for solitude (Einsamkeit) and freedom in the autonomous pursuit of truth;
- the introduction of the seminar system as the backbone of a community of scholars and students (Gemeinschaft der Lehrenden und Lernenden).

It seems to me that our digitized and globalized world offers new opportunities for realizing Humboldt’s vision under quite different circumstances. What we are still lacking is, however, a programmatic renewal of the respective curricula in our colleges and universities. It will take some vitally needed “out-of-the-box” thinking about the objectives of future studies in colleges and universities, and quite a wide array of diverse visions for the content of such curricula.

As the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has pointed out, this is not just a matter of redesigning bachelor and master courses. It affects the Ph.D. research and training objectives just as well. George E. Walker, the director of the Carnegie initiative on the doctorate, has pointed this out very clearly: “When half of today’s doctoral students drop out and many who do persist find that they are ill prepared for the work they choose, it’s time that all doctoral programmes face fundamental questions about purpose, vision, and quality.”

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With the notion of “Steward of the Discipline” the Carnegie initiative on the doctorate tried to provide us with a vision that could help us to strike a balance between the necessary critical analysis of the existing bulk of knowledge and creative thinking required for the production of new knowledge. “The doctorate should signal a high level of accomplishment in three facets of the discipline: Generation, conservation, and transformation. A Ph.D. holder should be capable of 1.) generating new knowledge and defending knowledge claims against challenges and criticisms, 2.) conserving the most important ideas and findings that are a legacy of past and current work, and 3.) transforming knowledge that has been generated and conserved by explaining and connecting it to ideas from other fields. All of this implies the ability to teach well to a variety of audiences, including those outside former classrooms.”

IV. Where and How Can the Humanities Unfold their Integrative Capacity?

To a large extent our universities are still organized on a discipline by discipline basis. Degrees awarded, reputation gained, and career prospects offered almost everywhere rest on the respective disciplinary framework. If inter-, or transdisciplinary work is pursued at all, then it is mostly done in a mode of additionality which ensures that the results can be published on a case by case basis in highly reputable and highly cited disciplinary journals. Efforts needed to integrate the methods used and to come up with more than just a summary of the respective project are often not undertaken because these publications all too often do not even count in today’s world of ratings and rankings (e.g., A-rated journals vs. ‘the rest’) when it comes to applying for posts, scholarships, or grants.

As far as I can see, we can nevertheless distinguish between five different levels or attempts of integration that are being used when it comes to tackling at least some of the challenges we are confronted with:

1.) As already mentioned, the mere accumulation of methods and techniques is the most common form of combining different perspectives when looking at one and the same object. It is mainly multidisciplinary approaches that follow this path, and it usually allows all the researchers involved to address their preferred disciplinary communities. Often it is even required with respect to future careers of the junior researchers involved that they adhere to this self-sufficient disciplinary mode of a somewhat moderately integrated operation.

2.) The integration of competencies from other disciplines is one of the most important ways of pursuing research questions of a global nature. For large parts of the humanities (e.g., studies on modern China or India) it is even a prerequisite if one wants to come up with sound insights concerning the respective region or topic, in particular when it comes to cross-cultural and comparative studies.

3.) To develop different methods and disciplinary competencies in one and the same person is perhaps the most ambitious (and sometimes cumbersome) way of gaining the necessary degree of intimate knowledge about the object under study. If pursued with great competence and stamina, this approach can lead to outstanding results and globally acknowledged findings, represented in 'opera magna' kind of books that are translated into many other languages.

4.) The inter-, or transdisciplinary aggregation of competencies in a medium-scale research group is a complex endeavor, but if thematically as well as methodologically and organizationally integrated it turns out to be the best way to go ahead in most cases. The centre approach taken by the Danish National Research Foundation is perhaps the most successful one to date.

5.) Problem-driven aggregations of competencies are the most common approaches taken in large-scale projects and programmes. They are often confronted with enormous tensions: (1) between the heterogeneity of the phenomena to be studied and the aspiration towards methodological coherence throughout the project, (2) the tension between the often microscopical obsession with detail on the one hand, and that of striving for a holistic explanation on the other hand, sometimes even at the global level, (3) and last but not least the tendency of each one involved to be self-sufficient in one’s discipline, and at the same time a huge disposition to epistemic immodesty concerning knowledge claims with respect to the overarching goals. Cluster approaches taken by the humanities are telling examples for these huge discrepancies between the objectives proposed and the everyday reality of the work done.

Experience tells me that the integrative capacity of the humanities can best be realized if the whole effort is conducted on a medium scale and to a large extent driven by the complex problem itself. Only if the very problem to be tackled urges the researchers to combine their relevant expertises are they ultimately able to fully develop their integrative capacity and to come up with surprising insights resulting in radically new perspectives and outstanding publications.
V. The Way Ahead – Beyond Unwarranted Expectations and Overambitious Demands

It is about time for the humanities to (re)discover their genuine strengths, to focus on fully illuminating the objects to be studied, and to unfold their integrative capacity by entering into well-defined partnerships in teaching, training, and research. It is essential for the humanities not to be ashamed of pursuing basic and curiosity-driven ‘blue sky’ research, and thus avoid to fall into the trap of demonstrating their ‘usefulness’ simply by becoming a ‘service industry’ for problem-solving in science and engineering. Instead there is a clear need for them to autonomously develop their own, genuine research questions which can prominently contribute to achieving social, cultural, or economic solutions. In particular, in our digitized and globalized world with its multiple opportunities for networking and interacting with one another, it is essential that the humanities bring to the fore how much it helps us to grow our personalities through these encounters. Ultimately, it is the other (be it an object or a human being) who enables me to understand myself and my environment much better than before.

This almost directly takes us back to the beginning of my speech and the considerations concerning the formation of engaged citizens and the need to “nurture humanistic enquiry because it provides an essential foundation for understanding what makes life meaningful and sustains the well springs of civil society.” This can only be achieved if we move beyond the “short-term perspective” that threatens not only America’s colleges and universities. It is important to remind ourselves that universities “are special communities where students, teachers, and researchers strive to transcend their limitations and, on occasion, to expand the boundaries of human achievement.” As Christopher L. Eisgruber on the occasion of his presidential installation has pointed out (by clearly echoing Humboldt’s notion of the need for a community of scholars and students), even today “scholarship and teaching are mutually reinforcing activities – that scholars learn from their students’ questions, and that students learn best when they are exposed to, and can participate in, research that extends the frontiers of knowledge.”

In view of the manifold violations of human rights, the presence of torture, humiliation, and discrimination in various parts of the world, it may seem somewhat overoptimistic to argue in favour of a move towards a “new humanism” as proposed by Irina Bokova, the UNESCO

31 Ibid., p. 5.
32 Ibid., p. 7.
Director-General. As Homi K. Bhabha in his speech on November 18, 2013 pointed out, it may be about time to reframe the concept of humanism in such a way that it “inspires global solidarity built on values of social equity, global justice, and sustainable development, whether in the realms of ecology, technology, or the economy.”

Towards the end of his speech Homi Bhabha, last but not least in view of the lack of adequate funding opportunities for humanities research, raises the question: “How can the humanism take root if the very soil of humanistic thought is left to wither? What is tragically neglected in this era of Big Data is the remarkable integrative capabilities of the humanities. The integrative capability of the humanities has given rise to a number of hybrid and hyphenated disciplines. Prominent amongst them are the digital humanities; the medical humanities; ecological humanities; humanities and human rights; ‘imaging’ in the sciences and arts – to name but a few. Notice how such interdisciplinary formations display the extension of the humanities into areas of public policy, social action, ecological sustainability, and social ethics. Notice, too, how the ‘integrative’ impulse of the humanities is structured along the lines of inclusion and diversity, so that ‘public reason’ is accessible across social divisions, cultural differences, and geopolitical disjunctions.”

Such a contextualization of humanistic studies is not only linking the present to the past but it also puts great hopes on the future. Despite all the contingencies and complexities, it “provides us with an aspirational vision of the ‘not yet’ that binds us ever more firmly and realistically to protecting and transforming the world as we know it”. If Elizabeth Costello were here today, she would probably warn us against such attempts to place “hopes and expectations on the humanities that they could never fulfill”. But I do think, very much in line with Samuel Beckett, that we have no choice other than to carry on trying to achieve our objectives: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Let me finish off on an optimistic note by demonstrating through an anecdote that the humanities are not always at a disadvantage when it comes to gaining insights and providing convincing results: A hiking group enters a village. Among them are a mathematician, an experimental physicist, and a humanistic scholar with a background in communication studies. They get into a dispute about the church tower which is a really impressive one, and it doesn’t seem all that easy to estimate how high the tower is. Each one tries to find out how high it is by using his own specific methodological approach. The mathematician moves forty

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 P. 125.
steps away from the tower. He then measures the angle and calculates the height. The experimental physicist – apparently the most sportive one of them – climbs up to the top of the tower. Then he releases a stone from his hands and measures the time spent by the stone to fall down to earth. This gives him the opportunity to also calculate the height. Given these quite cumbersome approaches, it probably doesn’t come as a surprise to you that the humanistic scholar is the first one to present his result. But how did he do it? Well, it’s pretty simple, he conducted an interview with a local expert. He rang at the door of the nearby rectory and asked the local priest.

In our age of internet, social networks, and google this anecdote may seem almost archaic, but it demonstrates that personal communication and interaction can be quite important when one wants to gain insights. In this sense I’m happy to embark upon an exchange of ideas with all of you, and to once again enter into an arena of mutual learning.

Thank you very much for your attention!