

Call for Papers

**The Ethics and Narratives of Non-Knowledge:  
Literary and Cultural Perspectives on the Limits of Research  
Schloss Herrenhausen (Hannover), 02-04 November 2022**

**New Deadline:  
19 April 2022**

Volkswagen Stiftung Thematic Week  
Ethics of Science. Current Challenges, Opportunities and Limitations

**Update:** Our symposium “The Ethics and Narratives of Non-Knowledge” will be part of the thematic week “Ethics of Science. Current Challenges, Opportunities and Limitations”, hosted by the Volkswagen Foundation. We look forward to welcoming you to Schloss Herrenhausen near Hannover, and to exchanging ideas with an interdisciplinary group of both established scholars and young researchers. Please note that due to a scheduling conflict, the thematic week had to be postponed to November, which gives us the opportunity to extend the deadline for proposals.



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Political and sociological debates have postulated the ideal of a ‘knowledge society’, emphasizing competitive advantages associated with sharing, circulating, and capitalising scientific knowledge. An increase of knowledge, however, is inextricably linked to an increase of non-knowledge and uncertainty. As Jürgen Habermas pointed out, COVID-19 has given evidence of our ignorance, encompassing also the unpredictable socio-economic consequences of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> During the crisis, academics have produced vast amounts of “knowledge about our ignorance, about the compulsion to act and live in doubt”.<sup>2</sup> How do we conceptualize non-knowledge? Which narratives shape these concepts and their ethical framework? Knowledge production needs to be understood as specific to particular disciplines.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, limits of knowledge are also discipline-specific.<sup>4</sup> Scientific production of knowledge presupposes limits: research problems are based on exposure of knowledge that is yet to be had; methodological choices are made in view of technical possibilities and limitations; theoretical concepts delineate the relatively small portion of what can be grasped from what cannot. Public interest in limits of scientific knowledge is nonetheless especially triggered when these limits are self-imposed, based on ethical, rather than technological considerations.

Currently, the most widely discussed areas of research concerning such self-imposed limits are geo-engineering, human stem cell research, intelligence research, robotics and singularity. For example, with the advances in AI sparked by neural networks, as most recently illustrated by the triumph of AlphaGo and DeepL, or the public debate about robots as a solution to the health-care crisis, ethical issues about the expansion of knowledge have become more virulent than ever. The conscious choice of non-knowledge over a potential abuse of knowledge resulting in loss of social cohesion is thus reimagined as an ethical choice.

The symposium examines ignorance as a strategic ploy linked to research ethics, specifically, the notion that knowledge should not be pursued at all cost. We explore what and how literary and cultural perspectives on the limits of knowledge and knowledge-production can contribute to public and scientific debates about the ethics of research. Patterns of these debates are recurring and – as narratives, metaphors, rhetorical figures – lend themselves to textual analysis. Furthermore, literary and cultural works explore those limits and thus participate in producing such narratives. They are not just mirroring but shaping public debate about scientific knowledge by negotiating the ethical limits imposed on – and transgressed by – scholarly research. We invite contributions by researchers from all disciplines of the Humanities which examine literary and cultural narratives and/or narratives in the realms of public and scientific debate, which may help to read and understand both, as well as prove productive for further developing an ethics of knowledge.

20-minute papers addressing the overarching concerns may include, but are not limited to:

- historical ways of coping with gaps in human knowledge and ethical concerns related to filling those gaps, taboos in scientific research,
- criteria and methodologies to describe the aesthetic ways to perceive and portray the ethical limits of knowledge and thus come to a better understanding of how they enact the potential of ignorance for affective politics,
- case studies of literary and cultural productions negotiating
  - the limits of scientific research in dialogue with scientists and futurologists such as John von Neumann, I.J. Good or Ray Kurzweil,

- explorations of proposals for geo-engineering as responses to the climate crisis, such as Jack Williamson, *Terraforming Earth* (2001), political or industrial uses of doubt about scientific data and prognoses of climate change or medical hazards,
- stem-cell research and issues of cloning, such as Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005), David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Nancy Farmer, *The House of the Scorpion* (2002), R.K. Morgan, *Altered Carbon* (2002), Eva Hoffman, *The Secret* (2001),
- science fiction films and thrillers on singularity, powerful machines replacing human beings, ethical concerns about the status of intelligent machines in society and their relationship to human beings as the non-human 'Other', as in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019), *Ex Machina* (2015), *Humans* (2015-2018), *Black Mirror* (2011-2019), and *The Stepford Wives* (novel: 1972, films 1974 and 2004), prospects of life after death as an avatar, as in Greg Daniels' *Upload* (2020),
- ethical concerns related to engineered ignorance, including trade secrets and military technologies,
- impact of ethical concerns in feminist studies and postcolonial studies.

Please submit your **proposals (300-400 words)** and a **short biographical note** to [anna.auguscik@uol.de](mailto:anna.auguscik@uol.de) and [simone.broders@fau.de](mailto:simone.broders@fau.de) no later than **19 April 2022**.

**In addition to the familiar panel format** typical of Humanities conferences, we are going to host a panel discussion and two workshops with different focal points. The Volkswagen Foundation will provide symposiums integrated into the thematic week with funding covering travel and accommodation expenses (accommodation and catering will be taken care of by the Schloss Herrenhausen team).

#### Young Researchers Forum with Poster Vernissage (Do feel free to forward this call to suitable PhD candidates)

Apart from submitting proposals for papers, there is an option for young researchers to exhibit their projects as posters, promoting direct conversation with other symposium attendees interested in the same topics. Please submit a brief **description** of your project (c. 200 words) and a **short biographical note** to [anna.auguscik@uol.de](mailto:anna.auguscik@uol.de) and [simone.broders@fau.de](mailto:simone.broders@fau.de) no later than **19 April 2022**, indicating any equipment you are going to require for your poster presentation.

#### Confirmed Keynote speakers:

**Nina Janich** is Professor of German Linguistics at TU Darmstadt. Her publications focus strongly on the discursive self-representation of science as well as the representation of non-knowledge in scientific discourses.

**Huiwen (Helen) Zhang** is Assistant Professor of Sinology and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Bergen, Norway. Through her international research activity, she has a unique perspective on the different ways of dealing with non-knowledge and research ethics in various countries and research cultures, experiences reflected in her theory of transreading.

#### Panel Discussion: Close That Gap? Ethical Perspectives on Non-Knowledge in Research

A panel of international experts will discuss the ethical boundaries imposed on the pursuit of knowledge and how these boundaries are articulated and explored in their respective disciplines. We will extend the discussion to the representation of such discourses in literary and cultural productions, and to the responsibility of the humanities as an academic field in shaping them. Confirmed participants include: Verena Heise (Freelance Open Science Consultant, Oxford), Dunja Mohr (English Studies, particularly Dystopian Studies, Erfurt), Franziska Naether (Egyptology, Leipzig), Alexander Kenneth Nagel (Religious Studies, Göttingen), Thomas Reydon (Centre for Ethics and Law in the Life Sciences, Hannover), Dirk Vanderbeke (English Studies, Jena).

#### CONFERENCE HOSTS

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Reydon, "How Can Science Be Well-Ordered in Times of Crisis? Learning from the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic", *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 42: article #53. <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40656-020-00348-5>> (open access).

<sup>2</sup> Markus Schwering, "Jürgen Habermas über Corona: 'So viel Wissen über unser Nichtwissen gab es noch nie'", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 10 April, 2020, 3 <<https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/juergen-habermas-coronavirus-krise-covid19-interview-13642491.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Margaretha Horatschek, "From Knowledge to Knowledges: An Introduction", *Competing Knowledges – Wissen im Widerstreit*. Ed. A.M. Horatschek. De Gruyter, 2020, 1-36.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse", *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader*. Ed. Robert Young. Routledge, 1981, 48-78.