World of Patterns

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By happy coincidence, I got involved in scientific research very early—perhaps too early. I published my first paper at the age of 15 after completing an astronomical summer school in Havelte, the Netherlands (IWAA, 1980), where young people participated in short-term research projects under the guidance of professional astronomers. My parents had sent me there in an attempt to rein in my boredom. They turned out to be right on target. Together with another summer school participant, I wrote a short article about an algorithmic procedure for detecting globular star clusters. It was a naive method that nevertheless produced some surprising results. For the first time I realized how much fun it was to write about a little discovery and then publish it.

The following year I attended the more international IAYC summer school in Ismailia, Egypt, where I participated in the Theory of Science group. We had both European and Egyptian instructors who involved us in their projects, one of the highlights of which was research on the step pyramids of Saqqara. It was my first acquaintance with the world outside of Europe, a revelation I still haven’t gotten over. I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers and instructors at these summer schools.
When I began as a student at the University of Utrecht in 1983, in addition to the main subjects in physics and astronomy, I also did elective coursework in philosophy, musicology, history, and art history. After my first degree, I felt the need to leave the Netherlands and studied humanities at the University of La Sapienza in Rome, because there I could study all the humanities disciplines simultaneously, something that was not possible back home. However, I continued to prefer the more formal approach, such as formal stylistics and stemmatic philology. Ideally, I wanted to combine the sciences and the humanities. It was not until 1988, when I returned to the Netherlands, that I understood what I really wanted to pursue: artificial intelligence, in particular computational linguistics. In 1995 I obtained my PhD in computational linguistics from the University of Amsterdam. And in 1998 I published my first book, in which I aimed to make my work accessible to nonspecialists: Beyond Grammar: An Experience-Based Theory of Language.

After some wandering—from working as a consultant researcher at Xerox PARC (California) to being a professor of artificial intelligence at the University of St Andrews (Scotland)—I came back to the Netherlands full time in 2008. At the University of Amsterdam I became a professor of the digital humanities, a new field (at the time) that combines computer science with the humanities. I then realized that it was high time to write an overview of (the history of) the humanities, as part of the history of knowledge. My book De vergeten wetenschappen (The forgotten sciences) was published in 2010 and was translated into seven languages (see the preface). My desire to produce a more general history of knowledge has had to wait until the current book.

I could not have written this book without the support of multiple research institutions. Although I am critical of the ever-decreasing percentages of research proposals that get funded, I fully realize how much I am part of this competitive system and how much I owe to it. It has allowed me to immerse myself in the almost inexhaustible treasure house of human knowledge. The current work was supported by an NWO Open Competition grant (The Flow of Cognitive Goods: Towards a Post-disciplinary History of Knowledge), an NWO personal Vici grant (Integrating Cognition), an NSF/NWO Digging into Data grant (Legal Structures), and a personal grant from the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS). I am also grateful to the Francqui Foundation for the International Francqui Chair at the University of Ghent that allowed me to work on the current English version.
The publication of a book often heralds the promise of a new line of research. That certainly was the case with my earlier work, but I doubt that I can live up to this promise again with the current book. Attempting to understand knowledge practices from a distant past or from another culture is indescribably fascinating. Slowly but surely you become initiated in the topic and then suddenly see a spectacular panorama before you. But sometimes you realize that it’s time for something different. If there is one pattern in my own life, it is that nothing is interesting enough to devote an entire life to—except for my dearest Daniela, Livio, Ella, Luca, family, and friends.
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