

# THE STUDY OF NOTES AND NOTEBOOKS: SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL ISSUES\*

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**ABSTRACT.** The aim of the present paper is to situate the recent attempts devoted to the study of the phenomena of knowledge management in a larger epistemological context. More precisely, I intend to ascertain the entire affair from the perspective of the philosophy of the humanities. This involves understanding it as an endeavor concerned with the search for regularities. As a result, key notions figuring in the repertoire of this kind of undertaking, primarily those of notes and notebooks, are scrutinized for the purpose of revealing their theoretical function. This points towards some ontological issues, such as the idea of taking notes as cultural kinds, namely something analogous to the idea of natural kinds.

**Keywords:** notes, notebooks, cultural kind, cultural artefact, pattern, commonplace-book

## Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to connect several developments that have occurred across multiple fields of study in order to sketch the contours of an epistemological reflection on the humanities. I contend that a good place to start would be the recent undertakings devoted to the study of notes in various contexts. This is the investigation of knowledge management procedures, with a special emphasis on scholarly knowledge in the early modern period. It is mostly done by historians and, as such it would be useful to situate it under the umbrella of intellectual

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history. A great advantage is that the field in question is quite homogenous, it is recent yet quite vast and prone to theoretical reflections. Knowledge management is carried out via certain patterns that are exhibited by different note-taking technologies and it is the mission of the intellectual historian to reveal this underlying structure. It is the job of the philosopher of the humanities to assess what this entails. I claim that the term “note” designates a kind that figures within the hypotheses that are propounded as explanations of the way knowledge is managed. The production of new knowledge from previous knowledge is a form of knowledge management and it is inextricably tied with notebooks and note-taking strategies. I will argue that a note is a cultural kind, and that it exists as a theoretical term postulated by intellectual historians who are seeking to uncover the underlying patterns of the process of knowledge management. From what one can gather, most historians are inclined to accept the existence of the abstract term “note” and to assign to it a classificatory role.

### **The new field of the history of the humanities and its epistemological implications**

Historians have recently reassessed the way we should think about the status of humanities as knowledge-engaging endeavors. The upshot of these reconsiderations consists primarily in the idea that the once sharp contrast between the natural sciences and the humanities is to be abandoned in favor of a more nuanced approach. I propose to call this view the Revision Thesis and to attribute to it the following content: in light of several considerations including, but not restricted to, direct historical arguments the nature of the difference between the natural sciences and the humanities is to be reconsidered<sup>2</sup>.

I will focus here on a variant of the Revision Thesis, namely the one put forward by Rens Bod. According to Bod, the familiar separation between the sciences and the humanities is to a large extent interpreted as, on the one hand, the mission of pursuing the general (something synonymous with the investigation of laws and

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<sup>2</sup> An indirect approach would be to challenge the opposition on what I loosely characterize as ideological grounds. So, one could study the reasons that were invoked for the divide on various occasions, situate them relatively to some interest or simply contextualize them to reduce their exemplarity. A direct approach is one that strives to amass historical evidence to undermine the opposition with little or no attention to any specific formulation of the divide. For example, Bouterse and Karstens have argued that pressures exerted by the emerging social sciences and their urgent need to establish an epistemic status in the second half of the nineteenth century have put the traditional humanities under scrutiny. See Bouterse & Karstens 2015.

patterns), and on the other hand the attempt to seize the unique (something that translates as a disregard towards laws and patterns) (Bod 2018, 15). Bod's argumentative strategy is to show that, from a historical point of view, it becomes clear that both methodological outlooks have appeared from within the territory of what we nowadays designate as the humanities. It follows that one cannot invoke the methodological difference in question as a basis for an argument in favor of an essential antithesis between science and the humanities (Bod 2018, 16).

Admittedly, Bod offers an unsatisfactory definition for his key notion, namely that of "pattern". According to his proposal the concept in question would apply equally well to "inexact trends" and "exact laws" as well as to anything in between (Bod 2018, 16). So, the notion envelops a rather large, unfinished and unspecified spectrum presumably open towards possible new entries for which no pre-established criteria of acceptance are in play. More research into the epistemic procedures of the humanities could add further elements to the spectrum, one can safely assume, as a matter of simple intuition, that "exact trends" and "inexact laws" would constitute obvious candidates. The challenge here would be to cite sufficient cases where the concepts in question successfully capture actual humanistic phenomena. However, Bod's account strikes me as having an initial plausibility and that his notion of pattern can be a gateway towards a better understanding of the *modus operandi* of the humanities and of their purported opposition to the sciences. Since, the main pillar supporting the idea of a fundamental contrast between the sciences and the humanities has been seriously undermined, we are able to reassess the entire issue and claim that rather than to accept a difference in kind one is better suited to entrain a difference in degree<sup>3</sup>.

This has important consequences. For instance, Bod emphasizes that the humanities might serve a multitude of functions but what is relevant for the Revision Thesis is the existence of a research dimension that one can ascribe to them: "In addition to all this, the humanities have a research function by asking questions and posing hypotheses regarding humanistic artefacts" (Bod 2013, 2). Unlike the natural sciences that concern themselves not with the study of a realm that bears the mark of the exercise of the human creative and productive capacities, the humanities, on the contrary, do concentrate on the outcome of such endeavors, or as Bod puts it the "expressions of the human mind" (Bod 2013, 2). This is to embrace the idea that one can attribute an empirical facet to the human sciences, but a caveat is in order. Strictly speaking, the objects examined by the humanities can be traced back to their origin, which is undoubtedly the human mind. This is synonymous with saying that the humanities do not deal with a mind-independent external domain. However, it is also true that those same objects are able to instantiate themselves in manners

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<sup>3</sup> Another way to challenge the division is by indicating that the humanities and the sciences are united in the pursuit of the same set of epistemic values. See Peels 2018.

that do make them suitable for a kind of approach that can convincingly be called empirical. Bod is referring to what can fall under the umbrella term cultural artefacts (Bod 2013, 2).

These are things like those one can find in museums or libraries, for instance, manuscripts or works of art. They can also be things one can enjoy in the privacy of one's home or in concert halls, for instance literary or musical creations (Bod 2013, 2). Bod calls them "humanistic material" or "humanistic artefacts", I will prefer the more general term "cultural artefacts". A crucial distinction made clear by Bod is that between what can be called a history of the humanistic domain, roughly the history of the production of said artefacts with the history of literature being a case in point, and a history of empirical humanistic research, namely something along the lines of a history of the study of art or a history of literary theory (Bod 2013, 2).

I contend that this is a fertile terrain for a philosophical account of the humanities since it is the place where all the major epistemic strategies for dealing with cultural artefacts are discussed in the sense proposed by Bod and accepted in this paper, namely as attempts to uncover underlying regularities with respect to cultural artefacts. Now, *prima facie*, most people would accept that there is a difference between a philologist and a writer and equate the former with the scientist. The scientist-philologist produces theoretical/scientific texts in which he formulates hypotheses with respect to regularities that he claims characterize literary forms of expression. I believe that from a philosophical standpoint it is best to start (in line with good old logical empiricism) with these results, which is to examine the language and the theoretical style in which these hypotheses are delivered. The level is conceptual so, what we are doing is to reveal the conceptual structure of the human sciences. It is not an investigation of the accuracy of these hypotheses or even of the correctness of their historical reconstruction. What is important is that there is an appetite for generalization in the humanities with a historical pedigree. The extent to which this amounts to reification or an excessive or ill-suited positivism remains to be seen.

Significantly then, going after patterns seems to accompany the humanist scholar for quite some time. Bod's argument only works if one accepts the premise that the division in question is equated with that between the search of patterns and comprehending the unique by the majority of those who accept it, or to the very least that this is a crucial aspect for anybody who accepts the divide. If it turns out that the division is held on different grounds, then Bod's argument is in trouble. Bod assumes that this is the case. My contention is that even if Bod's arguments are rejected one can still use some of his remarks with the aim of providing an epistemological account of what is going on in the humanities. One can accept, on pragmatic and methodological grounds, that the same kind of debate that aims at

clarifying issues in the sciences can be employed to clarify issues in the humanities. So, a good starting point would be to employ the traditional conceptual arsenal developed within the philosophy of science and to measure what results it would yield for the humanities. So, one such question would be: if there are theoretical terms that figure in the explanations of cultural phenomena, what exactly is their status and what are the ontological commitments of the researchers involved with regard to the entities that they posit<sup>4</sup>? The following section will do just this sort of thing but with respect to a more heterogeneous and interdisciplinary humanistic domain, namely the recent interest in studying notes and practices of note-taking as means of knowledge management and knowledge transmission.

### **Ontological commitments in the study of notes and notebooks**

I consider that a good place to start an examination of the procedures employed by humanist researchers when dealing with notes and notebooks is to address the manner in which they introduce and accept the use of certain key explanatory terms. More precisely, my purpose hereafter is to ascertain whether one can retrieve from within the works devoted to the study of notes the idea of cultural kinds. This would have to be something analogous to the idea of natural kinds, a notion familiar to philosophers of science. Simply put, I intend to find out whether one can speak about notes as cultural kinds.

Muhammad Ali Khalidi defines natural kinds as “entities that are neither individuals nor properties but kinds of individuals that share a number of distinct properties” (Khalidi 2014, 397). The point here is that the usage of terms like “proton” or “gold”, namely terms designating natural kinds, is a proof in the direction of some sort of ontological commitment towards the entities in question from the part of the scientist. As such, individual entities belong to a certain class, namely the natural kind, in virtue of the fact that they hold the relevant features, namely the kind-specific features (Khalidi 2014, 397). There are numerous complications regarding the issue of natural kinds, such as the question of whether it is sensible to adhere to

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<sup>4</sup> Leezenberg & de Vries 2017 adopt a similar approach. The authors develop a sort of analog philosophy of the humanities modeled on the philosophy of the natural sciences. The idea is that philosophy of science has two main coordinates. On the one hand, there is the normative dimension that requires the philosopher of science to be able to isolate the specific kind of rational procedures that ensure scientific knowledge’s special epistemic status. On the other hand, there is the descriptive dimension that demands that the philosopher of science calibrate the picture of science in accordance with what historical data disclosed about it. The philosophy of the humanities should do the same. One could also deploy the details of a specific philosophical tradition and built a philosophy of the humanities from that vantage point. For an example of this kind of endeavor see Pihlström 2022.

a realist stance and portray natural kinds as fully existing abstract entities or to embrace a nominalist position and to allow only the existence of particular entities (Khalidi 2014, 398)<sup>5</sup>. I am convinced that these are important clarifications, but as far as the philosophy of the humanities is concerned, we are yet at an incipient stage and as a first step we need to find out whether the simple idea of a kind, understood along the lines of the definition provided by Khalidi as something that “stands for a collection of properties that tend to be co-instantiated” (Khalidi 2014, 398) is present within humanist theorizing at all. My contention is that “note” is a theoretical term posited by the humanist researcher in order to capture the stable features of some empirical reality, i.e., individual entities or individual occurrences, that they are investigating. This is also a classificatory undertaking, not everything is a note, at least not to the same degree or in the same sense. There are some co-instantiated attributes that these individual occurrences (specific notes) hold, and this licenses us to integrate them into the class called the cultural kind note.

Some clues as to what an ontology of notes and note-taking would amount to can be found in Caroline A. Jones’s observations on the matter. According to Jones, note-taking is essentially a deliberately created technology, the mastering of which requires proper initiation, more or less standardized training and engaged repetition. It is not a natural operation or an extension of some natural propensities that one might manifest, of course excluding the trivial sense in which all human activities rely ultimately on the functioning of some natural ability (Jones 2016, 234). Notice that this is compatible with saying that even in circumstances where one is confronted with deeply personal note-taking exercises (keeping a personal diary for instance) one can still assert that this requires some sort of training since no one journals in a void, at the very minimum one has read other journals (perhaps some written by famous persons) so one has been initiated in the art of journaling. It is an empirical question what motivates people to keep a diary, but my philosophical intuition tells me that whatever the internal (i.e., affective) impetus might be, it is recognized and put into motion only after one has been familiarized with the practice itself.

So, the technique in question presupposes, according to Jones’s analysis, the workings of “unfamiliar disciplines that involve specific rational systems for taking, archiving and retrieving notes” (Jones 2016, 235). I propose that we isolate the first property attributable to notes in order to delimitate an ontology of notes: a note is a product of some artificially engendered and culturally reinforced procedure of dealing with units of recorded content. As such, it follows that it is a cultural artefact, it has the status that Rens Bod awards to the kind of objects that fall under the purview of the humanities. In short, we can treat notes as scientific objects pertaining to the

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<sup>5</sup> More on these aspects in Ellis 2008, 139 – 148 and Bird 1998, 64 – 79.

humanities. Notice, however, that from the perspective of those engaged in studying notes more must be said. In order to properly identify these objects and provide hypotheses regarding their nature and use one needs to have an instrument that would point towards the intended target. So, a note is also a classificatory term, a theoretical tool employed by the humanist researcher to execute his mission.

Jones mentions the mnemonic role attributed to notes<sup>6</sup>. The idea here is not just that of simply recording something as an antidote against failings of memory. It is also an admission of the essential forgetfulness of the human being, and it implies the idea of the projective character of the human predicament. One registers something with the background assumption that the information will serve for a future endeavor. We do not clearly perceive at the present moment what this subsequent project entails, but we do have some image of what we are pursuing and aspire to reusing a particular piece of information when the opportunity arises<sup>7</sup>. When Jones introduces the phrase “future technologies of the self” (Jones 2016, 236), I believe that this is what she has in mind. Not just envisaged future work of some kind but also our future self as subject to the practice of note-taking. Given the projective character of the human being and its essential forgetfulness the practice of note-taking becomes an optimal technique for the fortification of the self as an entity essentially concerned with what is to come<sup>8</sup>.

So, a second feature of notes that I propose we can extract from Jones’s reflections, is something related to their status of being transitional entities with an essential exteriority and a future oriented function. By essential exteriority, I mean the capacity of being reused because of being selected in virtue of a harvesting mechanism that is successful in preserving a kind of intrinsic intelligibility. The future oriented function comes as a consequence. A note, in the sense accepted here, can maintain a latent meaningfulness and await subsequent integration into an unfinished project: “The note promises to be extractable and combinable with other notes to form something massively coherent” (Jones 2016, 236). The meaning that notes carry is not exhausted by their integration into some articulated whole, they are compatible

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the relation between note-taking and memory see Yeo 2007.

<sup>7</sup> This is also the case for medieval note-takers such as Étienne Gaudet who, in a note to himself, is especially concerned with the integration of his notes in future endeavors: “See what can be applied to your thesis so that the labor of the past not be in vain”, Paris, BnF, lat. 16408, f. 222v. For more on this see Baneu 2024 forthcoming. I would like to thank Alexandra Baneu for drawing my attention to this aspect.

<sup>8</sup> The relationship between forgetfulness and postponed enjoyment in connection with note-taking is masterfully discussed by Alberto Cevolini: “When usefulness (i.e., the future) is valued more than pleasure (i.e., the present) a new temporal structure arises: the principle of delayed gratification, which represents a pillar of modern society” (Cevolini 2016, 156).

and amenable to a variety of styles of writing and inquiry because of their constitutive exteriority. Jones uses the phrase “pattern of characteristic concerns”, that, to me, captures the nature of the relationship between scholarly production and notes, namely the instauration and perfecting of a system of working with notes as units of recorded content (Jones 2016, 238). The connection to the future is instigated in virtue of an anticipatory quality, notes partially contain what the future project should be about: “Filled away (mentally and physically) for the later time when I will re-member the note, I imagine adding limbs (*membres*) to this fragment so that it can stand before me in some re-cognizable form, embodied once again, to remind me of the use I wanted to make of it in this future I was hoping would come” (Jones 2016, 238). This is obvious in the case of notes that are released posthumously, where all their latent potential is simply lost, or as Jones puts it “posthumous publication annihilates the note as such, by taming its mutable promise” (Jones 2016, 238).

In the absence of the efficacy of the selection mechanism the traits that transform a simple jotting into a note are lost, herein lies the difference between a note and a random amassing of information. The humanist researcher looks for notes, this is the sense in which notes are artefacts that are discovered by an undertaking that is to some extent empirical. They are to be identified in virtue of these properties. This is what makes them suitable for becoming the target of pattern searching.

To recapitulate, a note is characterized as a small textual unit yanked from some structured and coagulated textual situation in virtue of a collecting mechanism (“a system of notation”, as Jones calls it) that both safeguards its intrinsic intelligibility and empowers its compatible integration into a differently structured and coagulated textual situation: “That is the note’s *raison d’être*: to be so modular that it can be gathered up for shuffling into any number of alternative orders, but to retain sufficient ties to its original context to maintain a basic legibility” (Jones 2016, 236). This brings us to the last distinguishing feature of notes, perhaps the most obvious one, their brevity. One can argue that brevity is a necessary condition for something to be a note, but not a sufficient one. A note is a small unit of recorded content that is the product of a specialized cultural technology (harvesting mechanism) that ensures its status as a transitional entity (something characterized by an intrinsic intelligibility and a future oriented function). Only then, the supposedly simple fact of a note’s brevity can become a proper object of delight: “Its status as a fragment or bit is precisely what is so delicious about it” (Jones 2016, 236)<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> I must add that “brevity” is something that differs from one age to another. For instance, in the Middle Ages, a note could cover several folios, but since it only represented a fraction of the original it can still be considered a note. One must keep in mind that the atomic parts that were reused in

To turn for a moment our focus to the note-taker, one can speak about an ability, namely the ability to harvest notes. The note-taker cultivates this ability to get better notes, notes that better fit the essential characteristics described above, features that enhance the chances of obtaining high-quality notes. So, a superior note-taker has a note-selection-ability, one might even call it using contemporary parlance an epistemic virtue of the reliabilist sort<sup>10</sup>. All is done in light of the existence of a virtual epistemic community (one that is characterized by an effective history where principles are handed down to future generations) that reproduces its intellectual goals through the material incarnations of its writing principles, or as Anke te Heesen has emphasized: “One is a member of a paper-community, which has dedicated itself to formats and filling systems, where the organization of bound paper pages decides what will be written on them” (Heesen 2005, 584). I will rely on Heesen’s remarks to further clarify what I am after. The idea of note-taking as a deliberately created technology that is culturally reinforced is present in Heesen as well, since the claim here is that writing is a public gesture with a proper staging that is available to all who share a similar epistemic choreography, or in Heesen’s words to those who “follow and understand the *mise-en-scène* of work” (Heesen 2005, 584)<sup>11</sup>.

Etymology can be helpful in clarifying the more subtle aspects of note-taking as a cognitive undertaking. The Latin *notare* does indeed capture the main, yet obvious meaning of what the entire discussion surrounding the issue of notes implies, namely the idea of jotting down something. But, as Heesen remarks, the term *notitia* refers to an entirely different thing, a special type of cognitive process that is inherent to note-taking, namely catching sight of something: “Therefore, apart from the actual act of writing, noting also describes a particular kind of perception; *taking notice of something*” (Heesen 2005, 584). By design, the technique of note-taking affects the agent (i.e., note-taker), which is tantamount to something like the “habitual forming of a person” (Heesen 2005, 584). This in turn leaves the material traces of note-taking, that is of “a praxis with paper that requires certain gestures, performed acts, rituals and tools” (Heesen 2005, 584). I believe that, among other things, what one notices is the compatibility between extant material and one’s future projects. To make this explicit, first and foremost to oneself, one must engage in note-taking.

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the creation of new knowledge were much larger in the Middle Ages, when one freely reused large textual units from the works of others. I would like to thank Alexandra Baneu for this useful comment.

<sup>10</sup> See Battaly 2019, p. 269 – 287.

<sup>11</sup> Another instance in which one can see this aspect is in the continual game between the individual and the communal in the case of medieval notebooks. Although containing notes which serve an individual in his university work, some notebooks also contain indications meant to help others navigate them. Often, these notebooks were donated to the community to which their collector belonged. I thank Alexandra Baneu for pointing this out.

What this means is that one relates to one's intellectual endeavors primarily through notes. The idea of small units of knowledge incapsulated in notes is characteristic of the early modern period as Heesen correctly remarks: "In that era, the notes and small pieces of paper were the smallest material text-units of intellectual work" (Heesen 2005, 585).

By now, the methods of note-taking and organization of notes with regard to the early modern period have been extensively studied<sup>12</sup>. The case of Conrad Gesner, mentioned by Heesen, is well known in the literature<sup>13</sup>, but it is worth mentioning that Heesen emphasizes the role of note-taking for large, collective projects, as well as for the ordered storage of information: "The notebook was a unifying collecting point" (Heesen 2005, 586). Specific advice on how to take notes, organize and store information in commonplace books, as well as instructions on how to retrieve information were all put forward, hence the idea of a culturally reinforced technology.

I contend that the transitional dimension with both its exteriority and its future-orientedness is therefore theorized by Heesen as well: "The commonplace book thus refers a quotation noted down to its original context (its origin, the book) and, at the same time, is a stock to draw on for the memory, the speech to be given or the text to be written" (Heesen 2005, 586). This is an observation made in connection to Locke's advice on note-taking, the point was that the procedure in question was meant to "pre-structure" future endeavors: "The notebook was a technique in the service of discipline" (Heesen 2005, 587).

Importantly, in the case of jotting down observations and experiments, brevity was again considered necessary in addition to order. The case of Robert Hooke, mentioned by Heesen, is telling since he advised that observations are to be written on small pieces of paper and then glued into a bound notebook: "The notebook served as a record, a protocol" (Heesen 2005, 587). Usually, observations were taken on site and then transferred to a more permanent and static record, they were archived. So, the archive is here the secondary textual context that notes were supposed to be compatible with. The role of the archive was that of assembling a massive body of facts that were to be used in scientific explanation, as historians of science have recently shown<sup>14</sup>. The term used in connection with this kind of processing of information is that of "paper-machine", signaling the idea of a regulatory system. Heesen unequivocally describes the main protagonist, namely the commonplace-book, as such a "cultural technique" functioning across multiple domains (Heesen 2005, 589). In the following section I will home in on the features of

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<sup>12</sup> See Blair 2010, Yeo 2014.

<sup>13</sup> See Kraemer & Zedelmaier 2014.

<sup>14</sup> See Daston 2011, p. 82 – 113.

the commonplace book as they are theorized by research done in the humanities. I will show how they are used in the endeavor of proposing regularities with respect to humanistic phenomena, namely the phenomena of knowledge management. I will also claim that notes as I have described them, are a crucial aspect of this undertaking.

### **Cases: patterns and notes in the study of early modern knowledge management instruments**

One extensively studied form of knowledge management is the one developed around what intellectual historians have designated as the “commonplace book”: “In this method (which I will call the method of commonplaces) one selects passages of interest for the rhetorical turns of phrase, the dialectical arguments, or the factual information they contain; one then copies them into a notebook, the commonplace book, kept handy for the purpose, grouping them under appropriate headings to facilitate later retrieval and use, notably in composing prose of one’s own” (Blair 1992, 541)<sup>15</sup>. So, I contend that the type of material described by Blair satisfies the definition of a note that I proposed earlier, namely as the product of an artificially created technology. The protagonist of this epistemic strategy, namely the commonplace book, was according to Blair, a tool created by humanist intellectuals primarily for rhetorical and pedagogical purposes. Note-taking practices (and especially the epistemic conduct with respect to commonplace books) during the Renaissance are to be understood, according to Blair, as socially promoted and educationally enforced cultural practices (Blair 1992, 541). Furthermore, the common-place book incorporates the kind of harvesting mechanism that ensures the efficacy of those features that I attributed to notes, their essential exteriority and their future oriented function via the system of “subject headings according to the topics to be addressed” (Blair 1992, 542). Placing notes under a specific heading contributes to maintaining what I have called their intrinsic intelligibility because some connection to the original textual context is guaranteed. Since, usually, under a certain heading more information from the same informational pool was amassed, this connection is reinforced by the establishment of an informational web that preserves the intelligibility of each note. This way, the notes are kept viable for future undertakings that involve their recombination, an operation that, however, does not exhaust their potential, precisely because of the harvesting mechanism that is inherent to the commonplace-book.

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<sup>15</sup> The literature on the historical significance of commonplace books is extensive, for a useful taxonomy of commonplace books see Stolberg 2014, p. 449 – 452.

An interesting twist is that in addition to being extensively used for literary matters, commonplace books were also successfully deployed by those engaged in the study of nature<sup>16</sup>. Blair discusses the case of Jean Bodin, the author of a 1596 work entitled *Theater of all nature* (Blair 1992, 542). With Bodin, as presented by Blair, we are in the territory of scholarly activities. More precisely, we are dealing with an example of the way natural philosophy was generated from material previously existing within works devoted to natural history. Bodin was attempting to account for certain natural phenomena by furnishing some kind of hypothesis regarding casual factors. The commonplace book, according to Blair, makes this process possible by facilitating the construction of the explanandum as well as the aggregation of the arguments supporting the explanans (Blair 1992, 544).

The explananda are harvested from books dedicated to natural history, relocated and kept viable within commonplace books by being hosted under topical headings. This maneuver transforms them, it bestows upon them the epistemic dignity of a thing in need of scientific explanation, or as Blair puts it, they are upgraded to the status of “self-evident truths” (Blair 1994, 544). These “factoids” or “tidbits of knowledge”, as Blair calls them, are the main constituents of the “why questions” that form the explanandum, one such question mentioned by Blair is: “Why is a smaller seed more potent than a larger one?” (Blair 1992, 544). The actual explanatory work is done by proposing some general principle that accounts for the factoid under consideration. Now, it is true that these principles are never explicitly asserted by Bodin, but rather some intimations regarding their content are provided (Blair 1992, 546). However, what is important for the current discussion, is that in order to at least draw the contours of such an explanatory principle Bodin mobilizes his arsenal of notes which consists of material excerpted from books, observations recorded by the author himself or the testimony of other inquirers. Those entities that are not notes in the usual sense, namely information copied from a written source, gain note-like characteristics since by integrating them into a commonplace book one “treats each entry independently of its source, as potentially useful knowledge equivalent to every other entry” (Blair 1992, 547).

Every concretization of note-taking becomes an opportunity for others to exercise their own note-taking abilities and Bodin is no exception since his results were introduced into “the mental networks of the contemporary readers” (Blair 1992, 548). According to Blair, there are at least three extant copies of Bodin’s work

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<sup>16</sup> This is yet another way of challenging the divide between the sciences and the humanities by pointing to the so-called phenomena of “learned empiricism”, the thesis that in the early modern period the mechanisms of textual processing and those of scientific activity overlap in an interesting way, see Pomata & Siraisi 2005, p. 1 – 38.

that bear the mark of a preliminary excerpting operation, namely the selection of material by inserting certain headings to signal a specific interest in some piece of information. Marginal annotations reveal that, in addition to mining the text in search of factoids of all kinds, yet another cognitive procedure was articulated by employing notes. Material from Bodin is connected to material from other authors on similar issues or to different material from Bodin himself in order to highlight inconsistencies or illuminate coherence and commonality. On some occasions readers add their own input, that is, they correct or supplement Bodin with their own empirical findings (Blair 1992, 548). I submit that all this is proof of what I have been saying about notes and their general features as both empirical realities and theoretical tools used by humanist researchers in order to look for patterns with respect to cultural artefacts.

To make this point clearer I have to say that in the example discussed by Blair the crucial fact is that there is no extant commonplace book to be analyzed. All the research is done by looking at the finished work and inferring the existence and proper use of the commonplace method of knowledge management, or as Blair puts it “as if through a commonplace book” (Blair 1992, 548). This cannot be done without a background theoretical framework in which note-taking is defined along the lines that I have suggested. So, my contention is that intellectual historians engaged in the study of knowledge management reveal an underlying cyclical pattern of the process in question. It starts when the finished work goes through notebooks and ends up in another finished work. What is important is the specific nature of note-taking, since this is what explains the pattern, because commonplace books as artefacts are the instantiations of note-taking as a cognitive strategy. Without a proper understanding of the features of notes, the work done by Blair would not have been possible given the fact that the actual object is absent. One must be able to identify in the finished work that one is studying the traces left by notes, and one can do so, only if one knows those features and accepts that the term note designates a kind with those co-instantiated traits. So, one can hypothesize that such and such work was done by using notes. Here a note is a theoretical term, a cultural kind that one deploys in order to present a hypothesis about a cultural artefact. As such, the note as a theoretical term enters into the attempt of revealing a pattern, namely the cyclical pattern of the knowledge management phenomena.

Another example worth discussing, to further illustrate what I have said thus far, is Fabian Kraemer’s account of knowledge management in the case of Ulisse Aldrovandi. This is another case of the commonplace book type of knowledge management, or as Kraemer calls it the “humanist jack-of-all-trades” (Kraemer 2014, 389). Here we can closely observe an extant commonplace book and notice how it contributes to the finished work, as well as familiarize ourselves with Aldrovandi’s

reflections on working with notebooks and notes (Kraemer 2014, 401). The interesting aspect regarding Aldrovandi is his innovative approach towards the structure of a commonplace book by integrating features pertaining to other forms of information and knowledge management, such as those stemming from bookkeeping and administrative environments. Kraemer's thesis is that the use of commonplace books at such a large scale cannot but generate some lasting epistemic effects (Kraemer 2014, 402).

For instance, they determined the anatomy of the material that they were hosting, thus producing a homogenous patrimony of "short, de-contextualized factoids" (here following Blair, Kraemer 2014, 399). In addition, the anatomy of the finished work is influenced by the forms of organizational composition typically associated with the commonplace book, as for example the topical model (Kraemer 2014, 400).

The artefact that constitutes the object of Kraemer's study is the *Pandechion epistemonicon*, an encyclopedic notebook of natural history designed on the skeleton of a commonplace book. As in the case of Bodin we are dealing here with the use of a philological instrument for empirical purposes. According to Kraemer, investigators into natural matters frequently adapted these instruments to their parochial needs, in the case of Aldrovandi the commonplace book was supposed to accommodate and allow for the processing of an "unknown, potentially endless number of reading notes" (Kraemer 2014, 401). I claim that the commonplace book as a temporary storage speaks to what I have called the essential exteriority/intrinsic intelligibility and future-oriented character of notes. It is a place that conserves the viability of the note by preserving its features. Once extracted, the note is placed under headings, and this means that the thematic universe to which it belongs is kept in place, but the note is also compatible with other notes on the same topic. An illuminating, although somewhat gruesome, analogy is with an organ that is harvested and kept viable by specific maneuvers in special containers until its future use. Furthermore, the commonplace book is a tool that helps future endeavors. According to Kramer, Aldrovandi's ambition was to produce an extensive encyclopedia of zoology. The outcome was that he succeeded in publishing only four volumes during his life. The rest of the envisaged thirteen volumes appeared posthumously (Kraemer 2014, 402).

## Conclusion

My purpose in this paper was to gesture towards a philosophical account of the humanities. As a consequence, I started with the idea put forward by Rens Bod that, at their core, the humanities are just as much knowledge-engaging disciplines as the natural sciences. This is because they attempt to formulate and defend regularities

with respect to their objects, namely cultural artefacts. I have shown that in the recent field of the interdisciplinary study of knowledge and information management a certain cyclical pattern is put forward, one that goes from finished work through notes and notebooks to another finished work. I have argued that in order to understand how the formulation of this pattern can be defended we must look at notebooks and notes as means of achieving the goal of knowledge management. More precisely, their special features are responsible for that. I have isolated three features of notes: first, I portrayed them as products of some artificially engendered and culturally reinforced procedure of dealing with units of recorded content, second, I pinpointed their nature as transitional entities with an essential exteriority and a future oriented function, and finally I revealed how their brevity is to be understood in light of the other two characteristics. I have also asserted that notebooks are material instantiations of these features of notes. Lastly, I have contended that notes are cultural kinds, namely something analogous to natural kinds. Humanist researchers posit them to refer to empirical reality and to hypothesize about cultural phenomena.

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