

Volkswagen Foundation Press Release

Between Forms of Life and Forms of Heritage

1.66 Million Euros for new “Key Themes of the Humanities”

The Volkswagen Foundation has awarded a total of **1,66 Million Euros** for **two new projects** in the framework of its Initiative “Key Themes of the Humanities”. This initiative is focused on the cultural sciences and humanities disciplines. Scientists are invited to define project themes which take up problems of current importance to the wider society, problems which are in addition capable of being resolved only through interdisciplinary collaboration and if possible involve also the natural sciences. The Volkswagen Foundation will in this way contribute to the networking of scientists working on research projects in the humanities and also to stimulating work which spans the disciplines. Two projects have just been approved.

1. **750.000 Euros** for the project “*Heritage, Legacy, and Inheritance: Concepts of Transmission between Nature and Culture in Historical Development*” of Professor Sigrid Weigel of the **Center for Research on Literature, Berlin** – in collaboration with Professor Bernhard Jussen, **Faculty of Historical Sciences, Philosophy and Theology, University of Bielefeld**
2. **913.200 Euros** for the project “*Forms of Life: Philosophical Dimensions of Contemporary Biomedical Research*” of Professor Barry Smith of the **Institute for Formal Ontology and Medical Information Sciences (IFOMIS) of the University of Leipzig** – in collaboration with Professor Heinz Sass of the **Institute for Genetics, University of Leipzig** and Professor Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, **Institute for Philosophy, University of Leipzig**.

Forms of Life: Philosophical Dimensions of Contemporary Biomedical Research

The pathbreaking scientific advances of recent years call for a new philosophical consideration of the fundamental categories of biology and its neighbouring disciplines. Above all, the new information technologies used in biomedical research, and the necessity to master the continuously growing flood of data that is associated therewith, demand a profound and systematic reflection on the systematization and classifi-

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cation of biological data. This, however, demands robust theories of basic concepts such as kind, species, part, whole, function, process, fragment, sequence, expression, boundary, locus, environment, system, and so on. Such concepts belong to the implicit stock of knowledge of every biologist. Computerized information systems, however, demand explicitly formulated theories and definitions. To provide such theories and definitions is a task for philosophy, which is thus called upon to play an important role as intermediary between biology and informatics.

In what follows we describe an interdisciplinary collaborative project involving philosophers, biologists and medical informaticians. Its goal is a unified, synoptic and philosophically grounded theory of the most important foundational concepts of biomedical research. This theory will be developed and refined in close collaboration with scientists engaged in empirical research. It is designed to serve as the foundation for a new strategy for organizing and integrating information in the domain of biomedical informatics, and thus to show how philosophical research can enjoy a genuine practical relevance. It should thus also have consequences for philosophy itself, for example by providing new impulses for bioethics and medical ethics and by contributing to a new self-understanding of philosophy.

The results of our work will in the first place be made available to different disciplinary target audiences in specialist publications and conference contributions. At the same time however we shall seek to advance interdisciplinary collaboration between the humanities and the natural sciences through the organization of special conferences and workshops on the topics here described. In addition we shall document our results in a monographic work directed towards a wider public and published simultaneously in both German and English. This book will also set forth the broader philosophical consequences of recent advances in biomedical research.

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