

Intelligence in historical perspective

Concepts of human cognition, imagination, and wisdom in historical and intercultural comparison

Interdisciplinary conference at the Department of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Nuremberg (UTN)
November 19–21, 2026

Starting point and objective

The concept of *intelligence* is one of the central points of reference in scientific, technological, and social debates today. In psychology, neuroscience, and computer science, it is usually understood in functional, operational, and empirical terms. At the same time, the rapid development of artificial intelligence has reignited the question of the relationship between human and machine intelligence.

These discussions are conducted almost exclusively on the basis of modern Western concepts of intelligence. This also has to do with the conceptual traditions in many historical humanities. These rarely refer explicitly to "intelligence," but rather use terms such as knowledge, reason, insight, judgment, prudence, wisdom, imagination, or spiritual forms of knowledge.

This is precisely where the conference comes in. From a historical and cross-cultural perspective, it asks how human cognition and judgment have been understood, described, and evaluated in different eras and cultures—and what these historical concepts can contribute to today's debates on intelligence.

Key questions

The conference puts forward the thesis for discussion that what can be described as intelligence is not something that is given, but something that differs and develops historically and culturally. This gives rise to the following key questions for the conference:

- What terms, metaphors, and concepts existed in different cultures for what we today collectively call "intelligence"?
- What forms of cognition, imagination, judgment, and other mental faculties were central, and how were they related to each other?
- What role did emotions, affects, physicality, moral dispositions, or spiritual dimensions play in cognition and insight?
- Why were cognitive and emotional abilities related to each other differently in many historical contexts than in modern Western concepts?
- How do basic anthropological assumptions differ between different cultures and epochs (e.g., about the soul, spirit, heart, breath, qi, nous, 'aql, etc.)?
- What normative expectations were associated with cognitive abilities (e.g., wisdom, virtue, governance, religious authority)?

A particular focus is on the alterity of pre-modern and non-European concepts that challenge common modern models of intelligence or contribute to their historicization.

Contributions are welcome from the following fields, among others:

- Ancient China: concepts of *zhi* (智), *xin* (心), *li* (理), knowledge, insight, and moral judgment in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.
- Pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arab world: meanings of '*aql*, *qalb*, poetic knowledge, wisdom, and inspiration.
- Classical antiquity: *nous*, *logos*, *dianoia*, *phronesis*, *phantasia*, *sophia*, *ratio*, *prudentia*, *sapientia*, *intellectus*, *imaginatio*, and the relationship between knowledge, emotion, and virtue in Plato, Aristotle, Hellenistic philosophical schools, late antique Platonism, and Aristotelianism
- Ancient Orient and Egypt: wisdom literature, heart (*ib*), calligraphy, divine inspiration, and administrative knowledge.
- Medieval traditions (Latin, Byzantine, Arabic, Islamic, Jewish): faculties of the soul, doctrines of the intellect, imagination, prophecy.
- Early modern period: Transformations of concepts of knowledge in the context of rationalism, empiricism, and the so-called scientific revolution.

Contexts

A central concern of the conference is to discuss historical perspectives not in isolation, but in dialogue with current debates. The University of Technology Nuremberg, with its focus on "Human and Artificial Intelligence," offers an ideal setting for this.

The conference focuses on pre-modern approaches to intelligence, but also places them in the context of current questions and challenges in the relationship between human intelligence and artificial intelligence:

- How can historical concepts of cognition and judgment correct, expand, or relativize contemporary ideas of human intelligence?
- What implicit ideas about humans and their cognitive abilities underlie current AI models – and how do they appear against the backdrop of historical anthropological and epistemological concepts?
- What is understood as genuinely human in historical concepts, and what does this mean for the distinction (or relationship) between human and artificial intelligence?
- Can pre-modern, integrative models of cognition open up new ways of thinking about how we deal with AI?

Format and structure

The following are planned:

- Plenary lectures with historically focused contributions,
- Afternoon workshop formats with presentations by doctoral students and postdocs,
- A public evening lecture, and
- a concluding roundtable discussion on the question:
"What perspectives does intelligence research offer for the pre-modern humanities?"

Target audience

The conference is aimed at scholars from the fields of pre-modern philology, literary and cultural studies, the history of philosophy, science, and religion, and related areas.

Contributions from scholars in the early stages of their careers are welcome.

Call for Papers

We invite submissions of papers.

For the plenary lectures, we are looking for contributions that raise central questions about the understanding of human intelligence from a historical or cross-cultural perspective and stimulate interdisciplinary discussion. The plenary lectures are scheduled to last 30 minutes with 15 minutes for discussion.

For the afternoon workshops, we particularly invite early-career scholars (doctoral candidates and postdocs) to present their ongoing work or conceptual considerations in short presentations of 15–20 minutes. We welcome philological or cultural-historical text analysis or comparative contributions that focus on historical concepts of cognition and mental faculties.

Abstracts (approx. 300 words) should outline the research question, context, and approach. In addition to purely historical contributions, we also welcome submissions that open up a dialogue between historical perspectives and current debates on human and artificial intelligence.

Please send abstracts with a short CV by April 1, 2026, to gyburg.uhlmann@utn.de.