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“The Human” between the “life-world” and its theoretical (re)construction

Cecilia TOHĂNEANU¹

Abstract

The traditional split between rationality and historicity, concept and intuition, the form and content of knowledge has brought about an inappropriate approaching to humanities and social sciences. Presenting the main effects of such split, this paper aims at arguing the need to consider both the “empiric” and the “interpretive” as equally relevant for understanding our human world. It is eventually a meta-theoretical pleading for reconciling epistemology and ontology within a theory of humanities and social sciences able to avoid the two kinds of reductionism, foundationalist and textualist, related to traditional (empiricist) epistemology and respectively, to postmodernist hermeneutics.

Keywords: humanities/social sciences; explanation; scientific; interpretive; rationality; plurality

Two kinds of “experience” and the contemporary philosophy’s dilemma

Just as traditional epistemology hinted the end of metaphysics, that is, of the knowledge’s ontological commitments, so the historicist “new wave” also known as postmodernism suggests the twilight of epistemology, actually, of the idea of conceptual knowledge and rationality, whatever may be. If we would take seriously skeptic sayings such as Richard Rorty’s, we would live now *post-philosophical* times, when the systematic discourse is turning into an “ironists” common conversation (1979: 316-319; 1989). This development of contemporary philosophy suggests a shifting of interest from a kind of experience to another, namely from the positivist experience to a phenomenological one. The former,

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linked to the *scientific world* (or objective world) and its connected notion of testability, is meant to reduce the manifold images of the world to a single one, a supposedly “universal conceptual framework”. The latter, signifying the subjective experience of the *life-world*, points out the possibility of infinite conceptual schemas, or world-views.

A question to ask is whether the postmodernism’s disregard of the concept of rationality and its effort to getting knowledge rid of episteme is less destructive than the neo-positivist attempt to dispose knowledge of doxa (hence, of historicity), thus imposing an alleged universal model of rationality, the scientific one. If philosophy is to have a saying about our understanding the world, then it could only do it by bringing together the two versions of this world - theoretical, scientific and the non-theoretical, existential – and by equally inspiring itself from both of them. However, it seems that, at this beginning of millennium, the philosophy of humanities and social sciences still faces up to the dilemma: If we admit that human reality is inseparable from its meanings “for us”, then we could run the risk to stumble into a textualist reductionism. This is to say that social scientists simply invent their object, hence, denying the usefulness to justifying their own discourse. If we still embrace the assumption of ontological neutrality of “facts”, then we expose ourselves to the danger of falling back into foundationalism, whose result would be a reductionist approaching to social sciences in terms of the physical ones. Such situation reveals a misunderstanding of the nature of knowledge, in general, characteristic to both neo-positivist epistemology and “new historicism”. The two of them believe that there is a principled incompatibility between rationality and historicity, since both embrace the foundationalist supposition that rationality necessarily implies a non-temporal and non-spatial (that is, transcendental) subject.

The “unique” (nomothetic/intentional) meaning of human world: epistemology without ontology and its critics

Empiricist epistemology, commonly associated with the names of Carl Hempel and William Dray, is well-known by its endeavor to dispense humanities and social disciplines of metaphysics and to show how they can get a scientific status. Its normative project is thus guided by the central idea that the “scientific” excludes any ontological commitments supposedly typical to common, customary knowledge. In other words, the “scientific” and the “daily” images of the human-social world would be incompatible. Accordingly, humanities and social disciplines should strive to free from common knowledge that, due to its appeal to intuition, imagination, metaphors, or vague analogies does not offer more than narrative descriptions of facts. The daily experience would be responsible for the

low epistemological status of these disciplines since it could only supply social scientist' explanations with an "intuitive plausibility".

What do such disciplines have to do in order to pass this status and to get "rational" plausibility? Instead of merely describe individual actions or behaviors, they should rather organize and unify them, that is, to explain them. The "covering-law" theorists, above all, Carl Hempel, the author of this model, advise the professionals of these domains not to restrict detailing *what* happened, but to explain *why* it happened. In their opinion, a theoretical explanation of a particular event, however incomplete and imprecise would be, is preferable to describing it in all its details. May Brodbeck tries to justifying the significance of explanation in social sciences as follows: "The social scientist, deliberately selecting for study fewer factors than actually influence the behavior in which he is interested shifts his goal from predicting individual events or behaviors to predicting a random variable, that is, to predicting the frequency with which this kind of behavior occurs in a large group of individuals possessing the circumscribed number of factors. This is the price. The reward, of course, is that instead of helplessly gazing in dumb wonder at the infinite complexity of man and society, he has knowledge, imperfect rather than perfect, to be sure, but knowledge not be scorned nonetheless, of a probability distribution rather than of individual events. After all, while we might much prefer to know the exact conditions under which cancer develops in a particular person, it is far from valueless to know the factors which are statistically correlated to the frequency of its occurrence" (1987, p. 316). Therefore, the explanations of human phenomena should conform to Hempel's "nomothetic" model and, accordingly, they should aim at disclosing what is "typical", not "unique", namely, their constant and repeatable characteristics. Briefly, to explain an action or behavior is to deduce it (to be sure, with probability) from a comprehensive law (a "covering-law"), showing that it is an instantiation or a particular case of that law.

The "nomothetic" model meant in their protagonists' opinion, to account for the knowledge of the human-social universe, puts forward the scientist ideal of unifying knowledge, in light of it to know is (exclusively) to explain. The possibility to "nomothetically" explain natural and social "facts" – this is what would make the difference between the "genuine", namely, scientific knowledge, and the daily one. There is here the naïve belief, shared by the entire traditional epistemology that "the scientific image" of the world could ever totally break with our "daily image" of it. It ultimately means denying the relevance of the last one for understanding our human world. The social scientist is advised not to accept "pseudo-explanations", but only the "legitimate" (scientific) ones, since, however imperfect (for example, "explanation-sketches"), the second ones would be able to make facts *knowable*, namely *predictable*. Other said, he has to limit his discourse to what is testable. Again, knowledge means explanation, which, in turn, is identical with the prediction, since both suppose the concept of law. The

“covering-law” model has been subject to several objections. Mainly, the attacks against empiricist epistemology came from postmodernism and, in general, from what is called as “new historicism”, an intellectual movement strongly affected by the Hegelian tradition of thought.

Postmodernists, especially Derrida, denies the epistemology’s supposition of “the universal conceptual framework” (be it “nomothetic” or “intentional”) and hence, of the unique meaning of our world (a meaning allegedly captured by such framework). The human universe, they say, could not be understood by means of science: it is not knowable, hence, nor predictable. Rather, it is interpretable, and it is so because of man’s historical condition, of his inevitably dependence upon his “life-world”. Postmodernism rightly criticizes traditional epistemologists for having privileged “the scientific image” of social world, but incorrectly it gives absolute priority to the experience of the “life-world” which they turn in a source of radically different meanings and interpretations. Since interpretations would be incommensurable, it follows that each of them is as good as any other. It sounds as if the human world would be a fictional construction, actually a “text” outside which there is nothing (Derrida). This “linguistic turn” is certainly under the influence of structuralism/post-structuralism.

As Anthony Giddens (1987, p. 195) observes, this tradition of thought, although “dead”, “signaled some problems of major significance” for the humanities and social sciences, such as the arbitrary nature of signs, the important role of interpret against what is interpreted, temporality as an inherently trait of human world’s nature. It was indeed on the impact of such themes that these sciences, but not only, began to acknowledge their interpretative dimension and to rethink their epistemological status. If structuralism has been an endeavor to demonstrate the relevance of some concepts and methods of linguistics for humanities and social theory, instead, postmodernism is an intellectual movement fighting against any concepts and methods (see, for example, Feyerabend). Much strongly affected by Heidegger’s existentialist hermeneutics than by the linguistics, it gives an exaggerate weight to subjectivity (historicity) and makes from literary discourse - regarded as lacking any rules or norms – the unique model of approaching to our world, be it natural or social. Thus doing, radical relativists repeat the empiricist epistemology’s error: they also universalize a particular kind of discourse and ultimately substitute the irrationality for the rationality. What really is vulnerable in the traditional epistemology of social sciences? The “nomothetic” conception of human-social knowledge stands indeed on a problematic supposition: the possibility to separate completely the form of knowledge from its content. Empiricist epistemologists define the conditions (criteria) of a social science by bracketing the nature of the human universe. It is here what Richard Rorty calls somewhere an attempt to free from history and to establish non-historical, a-temporal conditions of knowledge. For the “covering-law” theorists, historicity

and rationality exclude each other. The two really are incompatible once the last one is conceived in universal, foundationalist terms.

The construction of an universal model of explanation, no matter whether the explanation refers to the natural, or the human world is, of course, an illusory project. Hempel's model can only account for the scientific dimension of social universe, not also for their *perspectival* aspects as well. It is quite possible to explain some agents' actions or human conducts in "nomothetic" terms, though not exclusively this way. The main mistake of Hempelians is to have been regarded the human world as wholly "nomothetically" explainable. Their pattern of explanation is supposed to reveal the single ("nomothetic") meaning of humans actions and behaviors. Our world has however two dimensions: one, empirical, experiential, another, existential and subjective. As really the last one is not empirically translatable, social scientists are required to merely ignoring it. This way, the actual conditions of knowledge are replaced with formal standards limiting the discourse of humanities and social sciences to what is testable or, at most, to what can be rationally debated, that is, appealing to arguments.

The "nomothetic conception of the human-social knowledge is a meta-theory (that is, a theory about the social theory) and not a theory about the social world. As such, it does not explain human and social phenomena; on the contrary, it prescribes how their explanation must be (Hempel, 1966:103). A model of this kind embodies the Aristotelian notion of *first philosophy*, supplying humanities and the social sciences with an ideal of intelligibility. On the other hand, unlike Aristotle's *first philosophy*, it does not say anything explicitly about how the human world is. These sciences are required to comply with the nomothetic model *as if* (that is, by implicitly supposing that) all human actions would be deterministically ("nomothetic") explainable.

The same *normativist* conception was embraced by William Dray, the author of the "intentional" model of humanities, despite his break with the positivist thought. Like in Hempel, his model has a prescriptive function, aiming to define the form of explanation in humanities and social sciences. On the other hand, Dray's project is, contrary to Hempel's, to show the possibility of an autonomous theory of human-social knowledge (what enlists Dray in the epistemological (neo)Kantian tradition). His meta-theoretical concept of "intentional" ("rational") explanation is supposed to be relevant only for the human world and thus applying exclusively to humanities and social sciences. Dray aims at rehabilitating the significance of daily experience and of its practical concepts. His right intent of recovering the interpretive dimension of these disciplines has lastly leads to restricting them to what he considers as suitably explainable in terms of individuals' free options, that is, in intentional terms. Are really the two epistemological concepts of "social science" free of metaphysics? What does it mean dispensing of metaphysics? Neither Hempel nor Dray deals explicitly with the issue of the nature of "the social". Yet, both of their meta-theoretical concepts of

explanation implicitly contain a certain kind of metaphysics: the ontological suppositions backing Hempel's and Dray's models of explanation in the social sciences. In fact, their ontological commitments are those that underlie the dispute between Hempel and Dray. Their meta-theoretical (epistemological) controversy (nomothetic versus rational) translates a theoretical disagreement (determinism versus indeterminism). We find here a good illustration of the fact that the process of discovering our theories, including meta-theories, however abstract, inevitably supposes some metaphysical beliefs, or hypotheses, as even Popper has acknowledged.

I would not end this first part of my paper before two short remarks. Firstly, the postmodernist objections against the positivist criteria of knowledge seem however to ignore something important and, for that reason, they are in part unjust. Namely, that traditional epistemologists' obsession of testability has had a deep motivation: they all shared a cautious attitude against classical ontological theories such as Hegel's, whose essentialism they rightly criticized. Surely, we are living post-positivist times, even "post-philosophical". Yet it would be a mistake if, due to this context, we would overlook the significance of the neo-positivists' caution lesson: social thought should do away with all theories and methods that, in order to account for the nature or the course of social life, appeal to abstract, impersonal forces, that is, to metaphysical (speculative) mechanisms. Secondly, much more challenging than the postmodernist de-construction actually, destruction, of our "the received (scientific) view" on the world, are some serious concerns to (re)construct something: something as complementing, rather than substituting the scientific view. These concerns belong to phenomenology, particularly, to phenomenology of medicine and I will refer to them in the ending of these pages.

Bridging old philosophical schisms and the potential of a new empirical challenge and confirmation

Rationality does not necessarily call for an a-temporal subject, so that the epistemic dimension of social sciences can be defended (justified) without keeping the notion of a *priori*. As a *human-being-in-the-world*, the social scientist provides his version of social phenomena, inevitably starting from certain conceptual or cultural frameworks. These frames of reference, that are actually the preconditions of what we call the knowledge of "the social", can be accepted or not, or revised by future social scientists. Or, this shows that social theories and methods are not so different and even incommensurable (hence equally acceptable) as postmodernism holds. In spite of their *being-in-the-world*, social scientists are able to debate, question, test and thus to compare different theories or models.

What then the social sciences are required in order to help us understanding our human world? They should not account only for their manifold of plural and

conflicting hypotheses, as postmodernism claims, but also for comparing and assessing their value, as epistemology requires. The former is relevant for the historicity of these disciplines, the second, for their rationality. Together, they reveal the dual nature of this kind of knowledge: humanistic and scientific, interpretive and empirical. Neither of them should be overestimated, otherwise we simply cannot explain, generally, the science, warns Jonathan Turner: "All concepts are, of course, reifications in some sense; all «facts» are biased by our methods; and all «facts» are interpreted to some extent. But, despite these problems, knowledge about the universe has been accumulated. This knowledge could not be wholly subjective or biased: otherwise, nuclear weapons would not explode, thermometers would not work, and airplanes would not fly, and so on. If we took theory-building seriously in sociology, knowledge about the social universe would accumulate, albeit along the muddled path that it has in the «hard sciences». Thus, in the long run, the world out there does impose itself as a corrective to the theoretical knowledge." (1987:, p. 159) The conclusion to be drawn from here, at meta-theoretical level, is a new sort of scientific realism, a «moderate» or «soft» one, that we could also name a «moderate» relativism. Without it, the social sciences would be simply unintelligible. Such «soft» realism requires us to renounce not at justifying our theories, but at doing it in terms of the bivalent logic, as Joseph Margolis suggests. In what he calls "interpreted domains of discourse", such as history, sociology, social psychology, or medicine, we should appeal to a "many-valued" logic and accept weak epistemic values such as "plausible", "apt", "reasonable" and the like, that stand for the value "true" (1995, p. 66-69). In virtue of the same realism, a theory belonging to these domains should be regarded as a model of intelligibility or order, rather than a set of falsifiable statements. It is, in fact, a conceptual framework apt to collect several empirical contents, to be applied to certain social environments of the same nature. Such model does not imply, of course, empirical consequences and therefore it is not valuable as true or false. Would this be a reason to dub it an abstract construction, or a fiction? No, as long as the social scientist is willing to admit that the order discovered by him is not a pre-established one, but a *post-factum* order. Doing it, he acknowledges the contextual/historical character of his hypothesis, namely his ontological commitment and opens thus the possibility of questioning and debating it within his scientific community.

So, even if theoretical models cannot be falsifiable - the conclusions they involve being only probable - instead, these conclusions can be "subject to argument and debate." This procedure, or way of operating is not at all typical to sociology, Jonathan Turner holds, but to most sciences. Scientists, irrespective of their domain, can be concern with "the «why» and «how» of invariant regularities" but the abstract laws of these regularities should be accompanied by models, descriptions, analogies and similar "scenarios of underlying processes of these regularities" (Turner, 1987, p.159).

Then, such “constructivist procedure” is related to the belief that the “social” has a multi-layered nature and that, due to it, the study of society requires a methodological pluralism. The knowledge of social phenomena cannot be based on picking out a single method, that is, on methodological monism. Since, as Richard Münch notices, making use solely of a procedure is “to select arbitrarily some of the phenomenon’s actual manifold characteristics”, with no effort to put it in correlation with the whole whose part is. Such practice, he holds, since distorts the social phenomena, triggers imprudent and improper conclusions, whose correction requires the appeal to a more comprehensive conceptual framework. This theoretical “frame of reference” is of major importance for Münch: as a “constructivist procedure” integrating different methods, it is responsible for unifying and ordering the empirical data. Without it, these data would simply remain blind, says Münch in Kantian terms, just as the absence of empirical observations would made this conceptual frame empty (1987, pp. 130-131). From the hermeneutic side, Paul Ricoeur points to the relevance of both explanation and comprehension for the two types of science, humanities/social sciences and natural sciences. Even if these types differ, a “methodological transfer” is nevertheless possible, he believes. Ricoeur sees no contradiction between understanding “the human” and its explication by means of empirical methods. The possibility of the “transfer” would show that the human-social world could be subject to scientific investigation. The main point in Ricoeur’s argument is that human world’s rationality does not fundamentally differ from the rationality of the natural world (1978, pp. 1236-1237).

Two examples, ending this paper, are revealing for how philosophy, as meta-theory and theory at the same time, could help to understanding our human world as pluri-stratified, therefore open to explaining and interpreting all together.

The first is selected from history, more precisely, from what is called “the new history”, whose beginning is related to François Braudel’s critical reflection on his own discipline. This critique has lead Braudel to discovering a new kind of writing history after having realized what will become the underlying supposition of his model: the multidimensionality of time. Accordingly, the human world implies an individual time, discernable at the level of *short-term* processes, a social time, characteristic of the *medium-term* processes, and a geographical time, typical to *long-term* processes (1969, pp. 112-119). Thus, history would unfold in different paces corresponding to its different levels, or segments. This way, the positivist prejudice of unqualified repeatability is undermined by the existence of the individual time. Similarly, the “humanist” supposition of absolute uniqueness is challenged as soon as we move from the time-segment of individual agents to people’s history in their relationship with the geo-physical, climatic or biological environments. At the level of geographic time, structures can be discernable. However, Braudel’s notion of structure is quite compatible with temporality: it envisages a reality that time wears out slower rather than an a-temporal reality.

Consequently, the structure has nothing to do with the *universals*; it does not suggest an universal (deterministic) rationality. The geographical, productive, or mental frameworks are long-lasting, though not eternal, constraints of human behavior and actions. The three segments of time, having their own rationality, are neither reducible to, nor separable from one another. “The new history” is illuminating for Joseph Margolis’s idea: “selves are the sole *agents* of history, though not the only causes of effective historical changes” (1995, pp. 255).

The second example comes from a relatively new branch of phenomenology, namely, the phenomenology of medicine. Conceived as way to “personalizing” and hence of “humanizing” medicine, it follows the Husserlian’s project: “back to the things themselves”. This means: “back to the ill persons themselves, back beyond theories of disease to the experiences of persons suffering from these diseases.” (Svenaeus, 2001:87). Proponents of this project question the basic concepts of the biomedical model and argues the need to supplementing (not *throwing off!*) the physiology of the *body* with a phenomenological theory of *person*. The last one “fundamentally relies on the individual’s interpretation and evaluation his situation and not only on biological investigation of his body. The physiology of the body, however, certainly affects and sets limits to the different ways we are able to experience and interpret our being-in-the-world” (2001, p. 87). Phenomenological approach to health and illness points out the characteristics of the two sides of what we name the “human body”. Often, what is primarily important is not the physical body, as defined in terms of physical and chemical proprieties typical to *all* human beings, but *this* personal (hence, unique) body. Similarly, there are not diseases; rather, there are illnesses. The former, the biomedical (scientific) sense of the term, refers to “a state or process causing biological malfunction”, the last signifies “the lived experience of being ill” (2001: 88). Phenomenology addresses the major problem of the difference between the *explaining* of disease and the *understanding* of illness suggesting that never will the language of medicine be wholly sufficiently to account for the individual experience of illness.

In a way, phenomenology of medicine is, like epistemology, a normative theory, or conception of health and illness. Yet, its intent is only to enrich “our understanding of health”, rather than putting the medical science back. This last goal would be an “absurd project”, Svenaeus believes, referring to “the successful history of modern science”. So, contrary to empiricist epistemology, the phenomenological project does not have normativist (universalist) intentions, and it is just for that reason that it could be promising, able to inspire “empirical challenge and confirmation” (2001, p. 87).

Humanities and social sciences should therefore realize that the understanding of social universe requires us to go permanently back and forth between intuition and concept, *doxa* and *episteme*, empirical data and theoretical constructions, the “life-world” and “the scientific world”. “The real”, whether natural or human, is

an open notion, infinitely defined and redefined through complementary contributions of epistemology and ontology. Reconciling them ultimately entails a dialogue between the two philosophical traditions, previously thought to be irreconcilable, analytic, and hermeneutic, whose descendents are Kant and Hegel, respectively².

Conclusions

The analysis of knowledge in the humanities and the social sciences is probably the most problematic that could be named. This analysis should take into account that the entities in the human world exhibit an attribute that cannot be found elsewhere in nature and that is called *intentional*. As humans' actions are meaningful, and as this meaning has to be revealed, the interpretation is necessary to humanities and social sciences - although not exclusive to them (having been also present in natural sciences: an electron is as interpretive as a poem, Heidegger noted somewhere).

But the interpretive should not be a source of confusions finally leading to the radical relativist conclusion that the real, whether natural or social, is a pure invention or fiction. The lesson to be drawn is not a post-positivist one. Even if the humanities and social sciences are doubly interpretive (as Charles Taylor says, considering that their objects are self-interpreting agents), what they do invent are concepts, not objects. Therefore, while giving up the positivist stance of *robust* realism, it becomes necessary to advocate a *weak* or *moderate* realism whose absence would make these sciences simply unintelligible.

It is only through it that we can explain why, though fallible, they do supply an increasingly understanding of our human and social world. And they can do it by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. It is to be part of our general understanding of these sciences that the notions of explanation and interpretation are not kept strictly apart.

² An original reading of the relationship between the two philosophical traditions, the Kantian and the Hegelian, is offered by Tom Rockmore. Contrary to the current opinion, Rockmore regards Hegel not only as an anti-Kantian. Rather he argues that Hegel actually completed Kant's project of legitimating our knowledge by abandoning, however, "the linear", that is, transcendental, strategy of his predecessor in favor of a "circular", namely, hermeneutical, one (Rockmore: 1993).

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