

The Other and the Subject: On the Conditions of Possibility of the Problem of Values in the Humanities and Social Sciences

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Introduction

Contrary to the so-called “hard” sciences, the role of subjectivity in the constitution of scientific discourse is out in the open in the humanities. Much of the quintessential theoretical discussions on what the humanities should or should not do have been on the role of subjectivity, the parts that social, economical, ideological and cultural agendas and backgrounds play in the constitution of knowledge. These discussions were held under the banner of “the problem of values” in the humanities, and they have taken a central place in theoretical discussions within the humanities and the social sciences, in particular since Max Weber’s famous (and often misunderstood as positivistic) plea for a “value-free” social science. (Weber 1982). How it is exactly that values play a constitutive role in the creation of scientific knowledge is an ongoing debate. I will not try to contribute to this discussion in itself. Rather, what I would like to do, is to pose the (transcendental) question of the conditions of possibility of this discussion itself. How is it possible that we discuss values as being a part of science? Where did we get the idea that values are constitutive for scientific knowledge, and where does the idea come from that discussions on this topic can be fruitful for scientific knowledge? In this paper, I will try to find out what is presupposed by the fact that we grant such an amount of importance to the constitutive role of values in the humanities. The answer is, I believe, a specific conception of the other as a subject articulated both in terms of Kant’s theory of the subject and Herder’s theory of the subject.

The problem of the role of values in the humanities is a consequence of the emergence of the other as a source of intellectual consideration. In order to make this point, however, I will first clarify what I mean by the term “The Other”.

If we take the term “The Other” in a broad sense, merely as referring to persons different from ourselves, then there have always been others and there always will be others. The ability of humans to communicate is based on the presupposition that there are other people. In this paper, however, I will use the term as it is interpreted by Emmanuel Levinas. According to Levinas, the other is not merely a different person. Levinas often refers to the other as a stranger. (for example Levinas 1971 parts 1A2 & 1B5, Levinas 1978 II4f) He differs from the persons in our every-day environment, he has

a sort of aura of strangeness, he breaks to our everyday routine and by doing so puts this routine into question. Nevertheless, the other is not unsettling simply because he is different, but most importantly because he exerts an ethical *appeal* towards us. The other summons us, through the appeal of his face, to take him in, to feed him, to recognize his needs and to listen to what he has to say. In sum two points are essential here. The first is the strangeness of the other, the second is the recognition of the other, someone whose needs are relevant and whose opinions have to be taken into account somehow.

I agree with Levinas that “The other” in this sense is still a universal category of human existence, and as such it is present throughout cultures and civilizations. Nevertheless, I believe it has been present merely on the level of the individual. Only quite recently has it turned up in more general political and scientific discourse. According to Reinhart Koselleck, the decisive moment is the so-called *Sattelzeit*, more or less from 1750 to 1850. (Koselleck 2004, p 240) What was decisive about this point was the arrival of the revolutionary consciousness, the idea, for the first time in history, that the future could be made into something radically different from the present. In the slipstream of this point, the idea arose that the past might have been very different as well. And from the idea that the past was very different, in combination with the colonial expansions, the idea arose that not only the past may have been different, but that there are fundamentally different people living in the present as well. An important fact here is that this means that the temporal other is prior to the spatial other as present in anthropology. This is clear by the fact that the scientific discourse involved in the origin of anthropology was primarily temporal. Exotic people were seen as studied not in the first place as others per se, but as examples of earlier stages of the development of Western civilization. (see Fabian 1983) In short, the anthropological other is therefore derived from the historical other.

Now, let us return to the problem of values. There would be no need for a discussion on the constitutive role of values in the humanities if there were no people with values which are different from our own, since our values would then be taken for granted and not put into question. So if we have a discussion on the role of values as a theoretical foundation for the humanities, this requires a theoretical account of how other people can hold other values as a precondition. And this in its turn requires an account of the other in the sense of Levinas, not as simply a different person, but as someone who intrudes in our every-day routine, someone who brings an element of difference in the daily life-world. As we have seen, such an account only became possible in the course of the nineteenth century.

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However, the emergence of the idea of the other as culturally other is not enough in itself. There is something more, and in the following pages, I will try to show that this “something more” is the Kantian conception of the subject. As a first step in this process, let us take a look at the different ways in which Kant and Herder have written about the turn to the subject in philosophy. We all know Kant’s famous words:

"Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial movements if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest." (B XVI, Kant 2005)

Now let us compare these with Herder’s view on the Copernican Revolution in philosophy

"All philosophy, if it is going to be of the people, must render the people the central point, and if one alters the point of view of philosophy in such a way, as the Copernican system merged from the Ptolemaic, what new fruitful developments would have to appear, once our entire philosophy becomes Anthropology." (Herder, quoted in Denby 2005)

As we can see, Kant and Herder both make a plea for a subjective turn in philosophy, but for very different reasons. Kant’s motivation is a lack of good explanations for the objective features of science, ethics, and nature from traditional old-school philosophy. His motivation is an argument from within philosophy itself, so to speak. Herder, however, offers a very different argument. He turns away from traditional dogmatic metaphysics because he wants a philosophy *for the people*. What is wrong with traditional *Schulphilosophie* is not that it is inconsistent or that it does not offer good explanations, but that it is unethical: it is undemocratic and does not have a practical agenda. It is not *of* the people and *for* the people. For Herder, philosophy should be about the practical lives of the people, and for Herder, “practical” entails “contingent”, since the practical needs of the people are related to their contingent natural and cultural surroundings. Herder’s objection is therefore a principal one, aimed against the very idea of a

universalist philosophy, which is in itself unethical. What is important for us, is that while both Herder and Kant plead for a turn towards subjectivity, for Herder this is also a turn towards contingency, while for Kant this is not necessarily the case. Kant just wants to answer the old universalistic questions of pre-critical philosophy in a new way. It is indeed true that the contingent has a special place in Kant's philosophy, in particular in his account of the moral, life and the sublime. Nevertheless, these moments of contingency were never a prime motivation. Kant tries to find universal answers to the old universalistic questions, and it is only through the posing of these questions that the contingent turns up. Kant, being the great philosopher he is, does not try to ignore it or reason it away, but gives it a very determinate place in his philosophical system. Nevertheless, the contingent as such has never been the main focus of the Kantian philosophical system, which stands in sharp contrast with what Herder has done.

As is quite commonly known, Herder was the first philosopher to make cultural differences the foundation of a way of thinking. In this sense, Herder can, much more than Kant, be said to be a forerunner of the humanities as scientific disciplines, understood as the scientific study of the other as a cultural other. One would then also expect that Herder more than Kant could form the basis for the problematic role of values in constructing scientific objectivity, since he stresses the importance of cultural differences in such a strong way, both in science and with respect to values, much more than Kant does. Nevertheless, the philosophers who have laid the foundations for the philosophy (or philosophies) of the humanities, people such as Rickert, Dilthey and Weber, were neo-Kantians. Why is this so?

Let us think for a moment about the discussion about values as constitutive for objectivity in the humanities. If this discussion is so important, it is because the stakes are high. It matters whether or not we bring this discussion to a good end. If we were to be clear on what we should do with our subjectivity in order to achieve objective knowledge of our fellow human beings, this would mean that the way is open for a much better understanding of the society we live in. And in order to do this, in order to believe that the humanities and social sciences are important in themselves and that understanding the part of subjectivity is the key to put these disciplines on the sure and steady path of objective science, there is an essential precondition which has to be present; namely that we have the ability to change our values.

Imagine for a moment that we would discover that objectivity is constituted by values, but that we can never change our values. This might be interesting in itself, but it can never be unsettling or revolutionary. The

only thing we can do with it, is to feel awe or repulsion, and there it stops. The way Herder describes the values of the other is precisely this. For example, Herder states that the way of life of a European musical virtuoso or an North-African shepherd is of equal value but radically different. (Denby 2005 p 59) As long, however, as there is no possibility for the virtuoso to become a shepherd or the shepherd to become a virtuoso, this will remain a mere observation. In Herder's account, therefore, there is no reason why the discussion on values would take a central place in the philosophy of the humanities.

If, on the other hand, we presuppose that we can change our values, then the realization that values are constitutive for knowledge is very striking and unsettling, because it can affect our own lives, for example the very fundament of how we think of scientific objectivity. Therefore, the fact that the discussion on the constitutive role of values is important in the philosophy of the humanities presupposes that we can change our values. We have already seen that it is not enough to discover that there are other people with other values. What then do we have to presuppose further if we want to grant the other the possibility of having a fundamental influence on us?

The answer is the following: if we want to grant the other the possibility of influencing us, we have to consider the other not merely as the other, but as an *alter ego*, a different version of ourselves. This implies two things: first some kind of basic structure that we share with the other, and second, something essentially alien about the other, something which is incommensurable with our own understanding of life. If we want to open up the possibility of being influenced by the other, we have to presuppose that some of the projects of our life are similar to the projects of the other. We have to presuppose that the other is engaged in the same project as we are. Only in this way, by realizing that there might be *other* ways of living *our* life, can the other really influence us. In other words, we have to presuppose that both we and the other strive towards a similar goal, but that this happens from different points of view, which are essentially contingent and therefore changeable. More specifically, what we believe to have in common with the other marks out the terrain on which the other can influence us. So, in the case of objectivity, we first have to presuppose that the other might have a different kind of objectivity, or a different method of attaining objectivity, in order to let the other influence our idea of objective knowledge. In more general terms, we have to presuppose a universal horizon in which the events of contingency can take place. All of this has a very interesting paradox as a consequence. The other cannot stand in a relation of otherness towards us precisely if he is too much the other, i.e. if there is no shared general or

universal horizon which serves as a condition of possibility for my relation with the other. To put it somewhat sloganistic: the absolute other can never be the other. We can only account for the phenomenon of the other if we take the other to be not completely other in the ontological sense.

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Now, in order to develop such a concept of the alter ego in which the same and the other are combined, we need the Kantian account of the relation between subjectivity and objectivity. What Kantian critical philosophy does, is exactly what we need here: it gives us an account on how universal principles relate to a contingent perspective, which, because it is contingent, can be alien to us. But this Kantian account is not sufficient in itself. Kant derives the objective principles of knowledge, ethics, arts and nature by abstracting from the specific character of the contingency from the part of the subject. So although contingency is a necessary premise for any kind of objective principle, it is no longer incorporated in a substantial way in these objective principles themselves, only formally. In the Kantian perspective, the only thing that matters is that we take *a* contingent point of view, but it does not matter at all what this point of view consists of.

In fact, concerning the other, we cannot say that the other is a different version of ourselves. We can merely say that the other is similar to ourselves, but that this similarity is hidden behind a veil of contingency. I believe it is quite right to say that this is the dominant view of what it is to be human in the Western world, both in the general public and media as in the scientific study of human nature. In “the Interpretation of Cultures”, Clifford Geertz formulated this, following Arthur Lovejoy, as the opinion that human society really is a stage play. All the actors are in principle the same and interchangeable, but they put on different costumes as they appear on the world stage. (Geertz 1973, p 34) I believe this opinion is, sadly, still prevalent in our common-sense thought about culture.

So we will not find an account of the other, defined in the sense we described above, in Kant. Therefore, Herder and the tradition of historicism come back in. It was only after Kant and Herder that the intellectual world realized that contingent historical factors might be essential for both nature and man, that the essence of nature and of man might consist of the fact that there is no timeless essence. As we have seen, taken in itself, this statement does not lead to much result, besides maybe a stronger form of exoticism. But taken together with the Kantian claim on the constitutive role of subjectivity, it has a much stronger potential. By making the role of the historically and

culturally contingent more important in Kantian critical philosophy, it becomes possible to create an account of the other as *alter ego*, as a subject which is equally contingent as it is universal. On the one hand, because Rickert, Dilthey, Cassirer, Weber and the other neo-kantians were neo-kantians, they still presupposed some kind of universality about the subject. On the other hand, because they have written after the century of historicism, so after Herder and Hegel, but also after Ranke, Burckhardt, Lyell and Darwin, they can no longer state that there are timeless absolute qualities about this subjectivity as it is in itself, regardless of its cultural environment. Therefore, their conclusion inevitably results in the statement that objective and seemingly timeless categories are always grounded on a contingent and dynamic point of view and vice versa, that we need timeless categories to give contingent and alien properties of the subject their full importance.

Of course, this is only the beginning. The question of how the contingent and the universal accounts of subjectivity are related to each other is still unanswered. In fact, the challenge for any post-Kantian and post-historicist philosopher of the humanities becomes even stronger than the challenge Kant put before himself. Instead of deriving objective and universal concepts from subjectivity, they are set before the task of explaining how objective and universal concepts result from a seemingly paradoxical subjectivity, a subjectivity which is both contingent and universal.

Conclusion

It is from this context, a necessary combination, one could say, of Herder and Kant, that the discussion on the role of values in the humanities, which has been so important in twentieth century philosophy, could originate. One can read large parts of the philosophy of the humanities, and even of philosophy of science in general, of the twentieth century as a series of answers different philosophers have given to this challenge. Ernst Cassirer, for example, made a distinction between the quality and the modality of universal concepts such as causation, space, time, substance, property, etc, the quality being a trans-cultural universal property and the modality a specific and contingent instantiation. (Cassirer 1970 pp 95-96.) Hans-Georg Gadamer, to give another example, has stated that culturally contingent values or prejudices serve as a starting point, and objective truth as an ideal. (Gadamer 2004, see pp 277-304) The movement between the two then is the process of hermeneutic understanding, or in other words, dialogue. All of these theories of post-Kantian philosophers share, I believe, one basic common trait. They all believe that objective knowledge is

founded on a subjectivist contingent basis, but they also believe that it cannot merely be reduced to that contingent basis. They are all of the opinion that there is also something universal about the subject by means of which changes in its contingent aspect are possible. Nevertheless, and this is the difference with Kant himself, they do not believe that this contingent aspect can be treated in a purely formal and abstract way.

What I have argued now is that this is possible because they are post-Kantians: they believe that there is something universal which opens up the background, a “playing field” or a “plane of communication”, so to speak, on the basis of which a critique or a change of this contingent situation is possible. If there were no such “playing field”, such as in Herder’s philosophy, there would be no discussion about values, since values would then be seen as a natural given which we cannot change. If, however, the universal aspect of subjectivity would be the only one, such as in Kant’s account, there would be no discussion as well, since values would not be essential to knowledge. They would just serve as a mere byproduct of the subject, as a necessary bother which is best kept out of scientific enquiry.

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