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HUMAN SCIENCES

Reappraising the Humanities through History and Philosophy

JENS HØYRUP

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Ludovica in memoriam

"Ubi caritas et amor,

Deus ibi est"

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In the main, the transformation of a set of lecture notes into the first version of a book manuscript was made during my stay as a visiting scholar at the Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Berlin in Autumn 1994. It is a pleasant duty to express my gratitude for the hospitality I enjoyed.

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INTRODUCTION

The present book grew out of a course on the "theory of the humanities" held at Roskilde University in Denmark, the participants in which were first- and second-year students of the humanities.[1] The title of the course may sound odd, the very notion of a 'theory of the humanities' being unfamiliar within the Anglo-American tradition. In German, it would be much more regular, namely *Wissenschaftstheorie der Geisteswissenschaften.* The subject is related to the traditional philosophical discipline *philosophy of science,* but with two important differences. Firstly, since the nineteenth century English *science* is narrower than German/Latin *Wissenschaft!scientia,* and often it encompasses only the exact and natural sciences to the exclusion of other scholarly pursuits; secondly, *Wissenschaftstheorie* may draw more on empirical (historical, sociological, and psychological) foundations than standard twentieth-century philosophy—and even standard philosophy *of science.* On the other hand, it is less prone than certain types of "science studies" to forget that science is a practice concerned with *knowledge.*

Any approach to the theory of the humanities must apply a double perspective. If the humanities are to be understood as *sciences* in the German/Latin sense, they must share properties that characterize many if not all other sciences as well: a "theory of the humanities" must ask what can be said about the humanities *qua* sciences. Yet if it is meaningful to single out "the humanities" as a particular and somehow coherent area, the "theory" must also be able to tell what distinguishes the hunaanities from other scientific fields, that is, to tell the *distinctive characteristics* o f the humanities.

The book consists of three parts. Parts I and II concentrate (each in its own way) upon the second perspective; part III is mainly devoted to the first issue.

As a historian of science I find it natural to approach the problem of the hu_manities through their genesis and development. Part I is therefore devoted to a presentation of select episodes and developments from the history of the humanitiess, *not*

1. More about this outlandish institution will be told in chapter 21.

only as a field of knowledge but also as a sequence of social practices. In our own world, indeed, the humanities are not only a type of scholarly work supported by teaching and popularization. They are also a *profession securing a living* for the social group of humanists, which entangles them in a particular social and societal context—and one of the insights gained by the history of science over the last thirty years is that there is an intimate connection between the professional setting of a field, the types of insight at which it aims, and its mode of thinking and of organizing the insights which it gains. Discussions of this interplay in nonfamiliar historical settings may, firstly, awaken our appreciation of similar relations between the intellectual aspect and the social and professional situation of *the humanities today;* secondly, the presentation of central ideas and characteristic problems and methods of the humanities in the context where they were created and once put to use will often give essential information about their meaning and carrying capacity.[2]

Etymology, however, is rightly claimed to "tell what words don't mean any longer." The humanities are no longer found in the settings where they developed. If their value (or some value of theirs) remains, this cannot be due to their origin (in the philosophy of science, this problem is spoken of as the difference between *genesis* and *validity).* Even though Copernicus *may* have found the mental courage to remove the Earth from the center of the universe because of the breakdown of the medieval social and ecclesiastical world order, his theory (as recast by Kepler, Newton, and Einstein) now serves to send planetary sondes successfully to the outer planets; similarly, the validity of psychoanalysis does not depend upon Sigmund Freud's personal frustrations and imagined mother fixation (as claimed by some of those who do not like the "Godless Jew," as he called himself). Taken alone, a historical approach to a body of ideas may give clues to their meaning but does not explain or demonstrate their general validity and coherence. Part II therefore switches to a *systematic* approach to the different "anthropologies"—that is, fundamental notions about the distinctive nature of human beings and human society—that may be presupposed in the human sciences.[3] It may be difficult to sum up in a simple formula what constitutes the object of the humanities. So much is certain, however, that they cannot be defined simply as "sciences concerned with human beings." The law of gravitation also deals with human beings, and so does biological

2. The presentation may seem unduly culturo-centric. However, while it is impossible to trace the development of modern natural sciences without taking the developments of at least the Islamic and Indian world into account, this is on the whole not true concerning the humanities. The humanities themselves have indeed been strongly culturo-centric since the Hellenistic epoch—first "Greek," then "Christian," then "European," now "Western."

3. The term *anthropology* is thus used as when we speak of "philosophical anthropology," which has only indirect connections to the concepts of 'cultural' or 'social anthropology' (cf. p. 191).

science. However much it makes use of guinea pigs and investigates bacteria, medicine is even *applied human biology* in its very essence. If we insist on setting up an easy (possibly facile) delimitation, the humanities will rather deal with those aspects of human existence which distinguish, or seem to distinguish, human beings from the entities considered by other sciences, and which therefore also enforce other theoretical approaches: the use of language, the production of symbols, the possibility of reflexive thought, the presence of culture.[4] Philosophical anthropologies try to specify or formulate—perhaps even to explain—these distinctive characteristics.

Such anthropologies may be *deterministic* in tendency; if we explain human behaviour or find the real meaning of human communication in terms of human biology or sociology or in the structure of language, little seems to be left to human freedom. Or they may (like original Sartrean existentialism) declare that everything which is explained is thereby nonhuman, because *human nature is freedom* aware of itself. Ultimately, the former kind of anthropologies assert that the apparently distinctive characteristics are illusive, and that they can be derived from and reduced to levels of reality considered by other sciences (be it systems theory or biology); the latter kind, by contrast, moves in a closed circle, *defining* so to speak the distinctively human as that which is irreducibly and thus distinctively human.

Quite apart from this logical fallacy, neither determinism nor the postulate of abstract freedom gives a meaningful account of the complexities of human existence, human communication, and human history. Therefore, the final pages of part II attempt a synthesis under the headline "human nature as dialectic and history."

4. These aspects of human existence are neither fully distinct nor identical; in part they extend, in part they explicate and explain, in part they condition each other, in a way which allows us to regard them as aspects of that elusive *specifically human* which we are after. To the same complex belong features like the production and understanding of art, theoretical knowledge, and religion; the sense of humor; and the consciously planned production of tools.

It is certainly possible to find additional characteristics that distinguish human beings from other animals. According to an anecdote told in Diogenes Laertios's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (VI, 40, ed. Hicks 1925: II, 42), Plato once defined Man as "a featherless, biped animal"—to which the further qualification "with broad nails" was added, as Diogenes of Sinope presented the Academy with a plucked chicken (which is, of course, parodic and was always meant to be, but which also illustrates the problem). There is no reason to deny that the choice of language, symbols, reflexive thought, and culture is inspired by the actual interests of the humanities and meant to exhibit the inner coherence of a field which extends from theoretical grammar to the history of literature and social psychology.

We observe that even Plato's second definition holds for females no less than males. In Plato's language, *man (anthrdpos)* is the human being in general (German *Mensch,* etc.). Thus also, in order to avoid extreme linguistic clumsiness, everywhere in the following (even in all quotations but two). Every reader is asked ro ascribe to the abstract person in question her favorite gender of the moment—be it her own or the complement.

Part III presents a general philosophy of science, that is, investigates those features which the humanities share with the natural and social sciences, and applies some of the insights gained to philosophical problems of particular relevance for the humanities, namely, moral philosophy and the relation between art and cognition. The detailed presentation is best postponed. Some general observations on the character of the volume as a whole may be useful, however.

Firstly, the exposition is meant throughout to be *read at different levels:* readers who have never heard of "scholasticism" or "normal science" may miss some of the more delicate points in the discussion without much damage to their increased basic understanding. Those who are already familiar with the fundamental notions will be offered particular interpretations, connections to parallel phenomena and related discussions, and adjustments of the coarser summary statements at the basic level; such adjustments and qualifications often occur as open-ended or elusive invitations to further thought. Many of them will appear in the footnotes.

Quite a few names occur in the text. For those who already know (for instance) about Thales of Miletus, his name should serve to anchor an argument with respect to what they already know; those who do not know him but are curious will find his date in the name index. If further information about him had been relevant (which it happens not to be), it would have been given in the text.

Secondly, and for this reason, *footnotes are not peripheral but* as important as the main text. They often contain further reflections, objections, and qualifications, or they serve as a device that allows a branching of the argument. Some of them contain material which is essential in subsequent parts of the text (in which case cross-references will be made); some of the longer notes are meant to suggest open-ended historiographic or philosophical lines of thought which cannot be pursued in full consequence. Notes should therefore *not* be skipped—but readers who approach the topic for the first time may find it useful to concentrate on the main text.

Much of the philosophical argument in parts II and III refers to a rather narrow array of authors: Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Jürgen Habermas, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Piaget, Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos, Thomas Kuhn, Robert Merton. They are not chosen solely because of their undeniable general importance but rather because they provide convenient stepping stones for the actual discussion. Nor does my selection imply that those who do not appear are irrelevant; some of the points I make in connection with discussions of Piaget and Kuhn might (for instance) have been made instead with reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein—but less conveniently, I believe.

The aim of the volume is *not* to give an encyclopedic survey of the opinions of select philosophers (etc.) but to develop a certain view on the subject matter. On the premise that nothing is detracted from (say) Aristotle, Sartre, or Merton if a book from the 1990s reads them with a particular purpose in view, I have therefore abstained from any attempt to cover globally the views of the authors to whom I refer.

Similar "productive readings" of more recent authors would be more disputable, in particular if they were based on disagreement. Even though part III can be seen as an alternative reading of facts and structures which also interest constructivist and other "post-Kuhnian" and "post-Mertonian" science studies, I have therefore intentionally avoided explicit confrontation as liable to be unjust if brief and unduly extensive if doing justice to the approaches under discussion.

References are made in most cases according to the author/editor-date system. A few standard encyclopedias, such as the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas,* however, are represented by abbreviations; these abbreviations are listed in the bibliography. The other exceptions are authors for whom a standard reference system or a standard edition exists (Plato, Aristotle, Kant, etc.); here I have followed established conventions and omitted a reference to the specific edition, unless it is quoted.

As a consequence of the different characters of the three parts, the use of references is uneven. In part I it would be impossible to give references for every point I make. In cases where I draw on relatively well-known secondary literature, I have omitted the text reference. Instead, the bibliographic essay (chapter 9) refers to essential works on the main topics. Quotations and specific points drawn from recent or less well-known publications are always provided with a reference; since the boundary lines between the specific and the general, between the recent and the less recent, and between the well-known and the less familiar are blurred, I have certainly erred on quite a few occasions, omitting references that were due and including others that might safely have been omitted.

Part II is much more of a personal synthesis, and the need for references is correspondingly smaller. I have attempted to include references for all specific points of importance, but much of what is said concerns general views and widespread attitudes, for which it would be meaningless to give a reference unless a particular example is discussed in some depth. Much the same could be said concerning part III.

All translations into English are mine and made from the original language if nothing else is stated. If a translation into another language is referred to, I am responsible for the retranslation.