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Transcending the Aesthetic Dimension

1 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HUMANIST TRADITION FOR THE HUMAN SCIENCES

(A) THE PROBLEM OF METHOD

The logical self-reflection that accompanied the development of the human sciences in the nineteenth century is wholly governed by the model of the natural sciences. A glance at the history of the word *Geisteswissenschaft* shows this, although only in its plural form does this word acquire the meaning familiar to us. The human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) so obviously understand themselves by analogy to the natural sciences that the idealistic echo implied in the idea of *Geist* ("spirit") and of a science of *Geist* fades into the background. The word *Geisteswissenschaften* was made popular chiefly by the translator of John Stuart Mill's *Logic*. In the supplement to his work Mill seeks to outline the possibilities of applying inductive logic to the "moral sciences." The translator calls these *Geisteswissenschaften*.¹ Even in the context of Mill's *Logic* it is apparent that there is no question of acknowledging that the human sciences have their own logic but, on the contrary, of showing that the inductive method, basic to all experimental science, is the only method valid in this field too. In this respect Mill stands in an English tradition of which Hume has given the most effective formulation in the introduction to his *Treatise*.² Human science too is concerned with establishing similarities, regularities, and conformities to law which would make it possible to predict individual phenomena and processes. In the field of natural

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phenomena this goal cannot always be reached everywhere to the same extent, but the reason for this variation is only that sufficient data on which the similarities are to be established cannot always be obtained. Thus the method of meteorology is just the same as that of physics, but its data is incomplete and therefore its predictions are more uncertain. The same is true in the field of moral and social phenomena. The use of the inductive method is also free from all metaphysical assumptions and remains perfectly independent of how one conceives of the phenomena that one is observing. One does not ascertain causes for particular effects, but simply establishes regularities. Thus it is quite unimportant whether one believes, say, in the freedom of the will or not—one can still make predictions in the sphere of social life. To make deductions from regularities concerning the phenomena to be expected implies no assumption about the kind of connection whose regularity makes prediction possible. The involvement of free decisions—if they exist—does not interfere with the regular process, but itself belongs to the universality and regularity which are attained through induction. What is programmatically developed here is a science of society, and research has followed this program with success in many fields. One only has to think of social psychology.

But the specific problem that the human sciences present to thought is that one has not rightly grasped their nature if one measures them by the yardstick of a progressive knowledge of regularity. The experience of the sociohistorical world cannot be raised to a science by the inductive procedure of the natural sciences. Whatever “science” may mean here, and even if all historical knowledge includes the application of experiential universals to the particular object of investigation, historical research does not endeavor to grasp the concrete phenomenon as an instance of a universal rule. The individual case does not serve only to confirm a law from which practical predictions can be made. Its ideal is rather to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness. However much experiential universals are involved, the aim is not to confirm and extend these universalized experiences in order to attain knowledge of a law—e.g., how men, peoples, and states evolve—but to understand how this man, this people, or this state is what it has become or, more generally, how it happened that it is so.

What kind of knowledge is it that understands that something is so because it understands that it has come about so? What does “science” mean here? Even if one acknowledges that the ideal of this knowledge is fundamentally different in kind and intention from the natural sciences,

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one will still be tempted to describe the human sciences in a merely negative way as the “inexact sciences.” Although Hermann Helmholtz’s important and just comparison in his famous speech of 1862 between the natural and the human sciences laid great emphasis on the superior and humane significance of the human sciences, he still gave them a negative logical description based on the methodological ideal of the natural sciences.³ Helmholtz distinguished between two kinds of induction: logical and artistic-instinctive induction. That means, however, that his distinction was basically not logical but psychological. Both kinds of science make use of the inductive conclusion, but the human sciences arrive at their conclusions by an unconscious process. Hence the practice of induction in the human sciences is tied to particular psychological conditions. It requires a kind of tact and other intellectual capacities as well—e.g., a well-stocked memory and the acceptance of authorities—whereas the self-conscious inferences of the natural scientist depend entirely on the use of his own reason. Even if one acknowledges that this great natural scientist has resisted the temptation of making his own scientific practice a universally binding norm, he obviously had no other logical terms in which to characterize the procedure of the human sciences than the concept of induction, familiar to him from Mill’s *Logic*. The fact that the new mechanics and their triumph in the astronomy of Newton were a model for the sciences of the eighteenth century was still so self-evident for Helmholtz that the question of what philosophical conditions made the birth of this new science possible in the seventeenth century was utterly remote from him. Today we know what an influence the Paris Occamist school had.⁴ For Helmholtz, the methodological ideal of the natural sciences needed neither to be historically derived nor epistemologically restricted, and that is why he could not understand the way the human sciences work as logically different.

At the same time there was the pressing task of raising one branch of knowledge—namely that of the “historical school,” which was in fact in full flower—to logical self-consciousness. As early as 1843 J. G. Droysen, the author and founder of the history of Hellenism, wrote, “there is, I suppose, no field of knowledge that is so far from being theoretically justified, defined, and articulated as history.” Droysen called for a Kant who, in a categorical imperative of history, “would show the living source from which the historical life of mankind flowed.” He expressed the hope “that the more profoundly grasped idea of history will be the center of

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gravity in which the chaotic movement of the human sciences will gain stability and the possibility of further progress.”⁵

The model of the natural sciences invoked here by Droysen is not intended in terms of a specific content—that is, a theoretical model of science to which the human sciences must be assimilated; on the contrary, he means that the human sciences must be firmly established as an equally autonomous and self-reliant group of sciences. Droysen’s *Historik* attempts to carry out this task.

Even Dilthey, on whom the scientific method and the empiricism of Mill’s *Logic* had a much stronger influence, retained the romantic, idealistic heritage in the concept of spirit (*Geist*). He always thought himself superior to English empiricism, because he vividly perceived what distinguished the historical school from all thinking in terms of the natural sciences and natural law. “The real empirical procedure that can replace prejudiced dogmatic empiricism can come only from Germany. Mill is dogmatic because he lacks historical training”—this was a note Dilthey made in his copy of Mill’s *Logic*.⁶ In fact all the arduous work of decades that Dilthey devoted to laying the foundations of the human sciences was a constant debate with the logical demand that Mill’s famous last chapter made on the human sciences.

Nevertheless, Dilthey let himself be profoundly influenced by the model of the natural sciences, even when he was endeavoring to justify precisely the methodological independence of the human sciences. Two pieces of evidence will make this clear and will, as it were, point the way for our own investigation. In his obituary for Wilhelm Scherer, Dilthey emphasizes that the spirit of the natural sciences guided Scherer’s procedure, and he attempts to give the reason why Scherer let himself be so influenced by English empiricism: “He was a modern man, and the world of our forebears was no longer the home of his spirit and his heart, but his historical object.”⁷ The antithesis shows that for Dilthey scientific knowledge obliges one to sever one’s bond with life, to attain distance from one’s own history, which alone makes it possible for that history to become an object. We may indeed acknowledge that Scherer and Dilthey’s handling of the inductive and comparative methods was governed by genuine individual tact and that such tact presupposes a spiritual cultivation which indicates that the world of classical culture and the romantic belief in individuality survive in them. Nevertheless, it is the model of the natural sciences that guides their conception of themselves as sciences.

A second reference makes this particularly clear: Dilthey refers to the

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independence of the methods of the human sciences and substantiates it by appeal to their object.⁸ At first blush, this sounds like good Aristotelianism and could indicate a genuine detachment from the scientific model. But in accounting for the independence of the methods of the human sciences Dilthey refers to the old Baconian aphorism, "to be conquered, nature must be obeyed,"⁹ a principle which practically flies in the face of the classical and romantic heritage that Dilthey seeks to retain. Though his historical training accounts for his superiority over contemporary neo-Kantianism, it must be said that in his logical endeavors Dilthey did not really progress very far beyond the simple statements made by Helmholtz. However strongly Dilthey defended the epistemological independence of the human sciences, what is called "method" in modern science remains the same everywhere and is only displayed in an especially exemplary form in the natural sciences. The human sciences have no method of their own. Yet one might well ask, with Helmholtz, to what extent method is significant in this case and whether the other logical presuppositions of the human sciences are not perhaps far more important than inductive logic. Helmholtz had indicated this correctly when, in order to do justice to the human sciences, he emphasized memory and authority, and spoke of the psychological tact that here replaced the conscious drawing of inferences. What is the basis of this tact? How is it acquired? Does not what is scientific about the human sciences lie rather here than in their methodology?

Because the human sciences prompt this question and thus cannot be fitted into the modern concept of science, they remain a problem for philosophy itself. The answer that Helmholtz and his century gave to this question cannot suffice. They follow Kant in modeling the idea of science and knowledge on the natural sciences and seeking the distinctive feature of the human sciences in the artistic element (artistic feeling, artistic induction). But the picture that Helmholtz gives of work in the natural sciences is rather one-sided, seeing that he does not believe in "sudden flashes of intuition" (or in so-called "inspirations") and regards scientific work only as the "the self-conscious work of drawing iron-clad conclusions." He refers to John Stuart Mill's view that "in modern times the inductive sciences have done more to advance the methods of logic than all the professional philosophers."¹⁰ They are, for him, the model of scientific method as such.

Now, Helmholtz knows that historical knowledge is based on a kind of experience quite different from the one that serves in investigating natural laws. Thus he seeks to determine why the inductive method in historical

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research proceeds under conditions different from those obtaining in the study of nature. To this end he uses the distinction between nature and freedom, which is the basis of Kantian philosophy. Historical study is different because in its domain there are no natural laws but, rather, voluntarily accepted practical laws—i.e., commandments. The world of human freedom does not manifest the same absence of exceptions as natural laws.

This line of thought, however, is not very convincing. Basing the inductive investigation of the human world of freedom on Kant's distinction between nature and freedom is not true to Kant's intentions; nor is it true to the logic of induction itself. Here Mill was more consistent, for he methodically excluded the problem of freedom. Moreover, Helmholtz's appealing to Kant without following out the consequences of doing so bears no real fruit, for even according to Helmholtz the empiricism of the human sciences is to be regarded in the same way as that of meteorology, namely with renunciation and resignation.

But in fact the human sciences are a long way from regarding themselves as simply inferior to the natural sciences. Instead, possessed of the intellectual heritage of German classicism, they carried forward the proud awareness that they were the true representatives of humanism. The period of German classicism had not only brought about a renewal of literature and aesthetic criticism, which overcame the outmoded baroque ideal of taste and of Enlightenment rationalism; it had also given the idea of humanity, and the ideal of enlightened reason, a fundamentally new content. More than anyone, Herder transcended the perfectionism of the Enlightenment with his new ideal of "cultivating the human" (*Bildung zum Menschen*) and thus prepared the ground for the growth of the historical sciences in the nineteenth century.¹¹ The *concept of self-formation, education, or cultivation (Bildung)*, which became supremely important at the time, was perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century, and it is this concept which is the atmosphere breathed by the human sciences of the nineteenth century, even if they are unable to offer any epistemological justification for it.

(B) THE GUIDING CONCEPTS OF HUMANISM

(i) *Bildung (Culture)*

The concept of *Bildung* most clearly indicates the profound intellectual change that still causes us to experience the century of Goethe as