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KNOWLEDGE IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

1. PREAMBLE

The history of the theory of knowledge confronts us with what appears to be a perpetual “frontier” mentality. No matter how exhaustive or ramified its previous philosophical labors may have been, it seems forever bent on testing the need for still another beginning. That is as true today as it ever was during the period of nearly constant innovation running from Descartes to Kant to Hegel. You have only to think of the startling frequency with which theorists continue to believe themselves to be initiating entirely new beginnings or, finally, to be correcting the hopeless conceptual errors and inadequacies of all past canons. Think, for instance, of Edmund Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* (1960) or W.V. Quine’s “Epistemology Naturalized” (1969); or, more adventurously, Michel Foucault’s Nietzscheanized genealogies (1977) or Paul Churchland’s would-be elimination of the entire “folk” conception of epistemology (1989).

In spite of such scatter, the history of philosophy conveys an almost impregnable impression of orderly advance and canonical assurance. It is probably closer to the truth, however, that every would-be intervention is matched by its own fresh summary of the import of the gathering history of epistemology. If so, then, of course, the comparative assessment of competing theories of knowledge cannot fail to be more complex, more fraught with incommensurabilities, than one might wish.

No area of specialized inquiry into the nature and conditions of knowledge is likely to be more profoundly affected by such vagaries than that of theorizing about the standing and conditions of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences. In fact, it may be fairly argued that the point of such theorizing is, precisely, to test what may be most convincing in the way of the epistemic interrelationship between the world of human culture and the world of physical nature.

Up to the present time, with the single large exception of the post-Kantian tradition and its progeny, the theory of knowledge has, in the modern era, almost always supposed that the conditions of knowledge in matters cultural are essentially the same as, and therefore rightly guided by, those judged to have proved successful in the exemplary physical sciences. That sense of priority and order and unity still counts as the somewhat uneasy canon of epistemology at the close of the century. It was challenged of course in the Kantian spirit, unsatisfactorily yet promisingly, by Wilhelm Dilthey (1989) and more radically, hence more contentiously, by Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche (see Löwith 1991), and Martin Heidegger (1962).

One may indeed be drawn as a partisan to the seminal intuitions of one or another of these last figures. But it is also possible to construct a reasonably stable and neutral history of modern epistemology that attempts (even if not altogether

uncontentiously) to explain the conceptual relationship between our knowledge of physical nature and our knowledge of human culture. That may well be the sparest and most useful epistemological inquiry to carry into the next century.

Provisionally, then, the following may be offered as a pointed summary of the best gains of the entire history of epistemology leading up to the turn into the new century: first, the expose of the insuperable paradoxes or skepticisms belonging to the original “Cartesian” tradition that spans the work of Descartes and Kant right up to the first *Critique*, resolved not without acknowledging the inseparability of ontic and epistemic distinctions; second, the replacement of all the forms of methodological solipsism, notably those of subjective representationalism, through the same interval, flagged, just prior to the publication of the first *Critique*, in Kant’s well-known letter to Marcus Herz (February 21, 1772), resolved principally in the post-Kantian period by acknowledging the socially formed and socially shared nature of our cognizing powers; and, third, the dawning discovery that if the first two gains be granted, there cannot be a principled disjunction between the conditions of knowing nature and of knowing the human or cultural world. But though these lessons are grasped in the abstract, the cultural and historical (human) world remains to this day the least explored sector of reality from the time of the Hegelian and post-Hegelian gains down to our own time.

As far as our own age is concerned, the analysis of knowledge in the humanities and the social sciences is probably the most problematic that could be named and, among analytic practitioners, the most neglected. It is now also increasingly contested, since the older canon, which regularly subordinates knowledge of cultural phenomena to knowledge of physical nature, has strengthened its primacy in academic circles, despite having been beleaguered in recent decades. Yet it would be difficult to argue that the “naturalizing” strategy that currently dominates the “canon” has ever demonstrated that it could actually meet the strongest, most interesting challenges that could be drawn from the human studies. In any case, that is surely one of the principal issues that we must inquire into.

In Anglo-American philosophy, for instance, which has taken a leading role in reclaiming the canonical picture, the actual effort at recovery has been marked by a number of odd lapses that confirm that we are still perseverating at one or another of the earlier phases of the history just sketched: for example, in the insistent disjunction of metaphysics and epistemology (Devitt 1991); or the recovery of a regulative norm of objectivity, much as in Kant, linking the “subjective” and “objective” sides of cognition even where they are thought to be inseparable (see Putnam 1987); or in the retreat from the contingent social and cultural formation of our cognizing powers, as in restricting Hegel’s innovation in Kant’s terms, if not in Aristotle’s (as in McDowell 1996). It is hard to see the importance of the cultural contribution if we cannot count on surpassing such faults. The old canon’s hegemony is bound to appear more problematic wherever the puzzles about the human sciences begin to mount.

These tendencies, hardly isolated, suggest the need to test the gains the earlier history vouchsafes (if indeed it confirms anything). Otherwise, if it challenges the familiar canon, the analysis of the humanities and social sciences may appear more arbitrary or opportunistic than it actually is. If, now, we hold to the history sketched, we may (or must) admit the prominence of a set of conceptual distinctions that are