

THALES

# Making a Difference

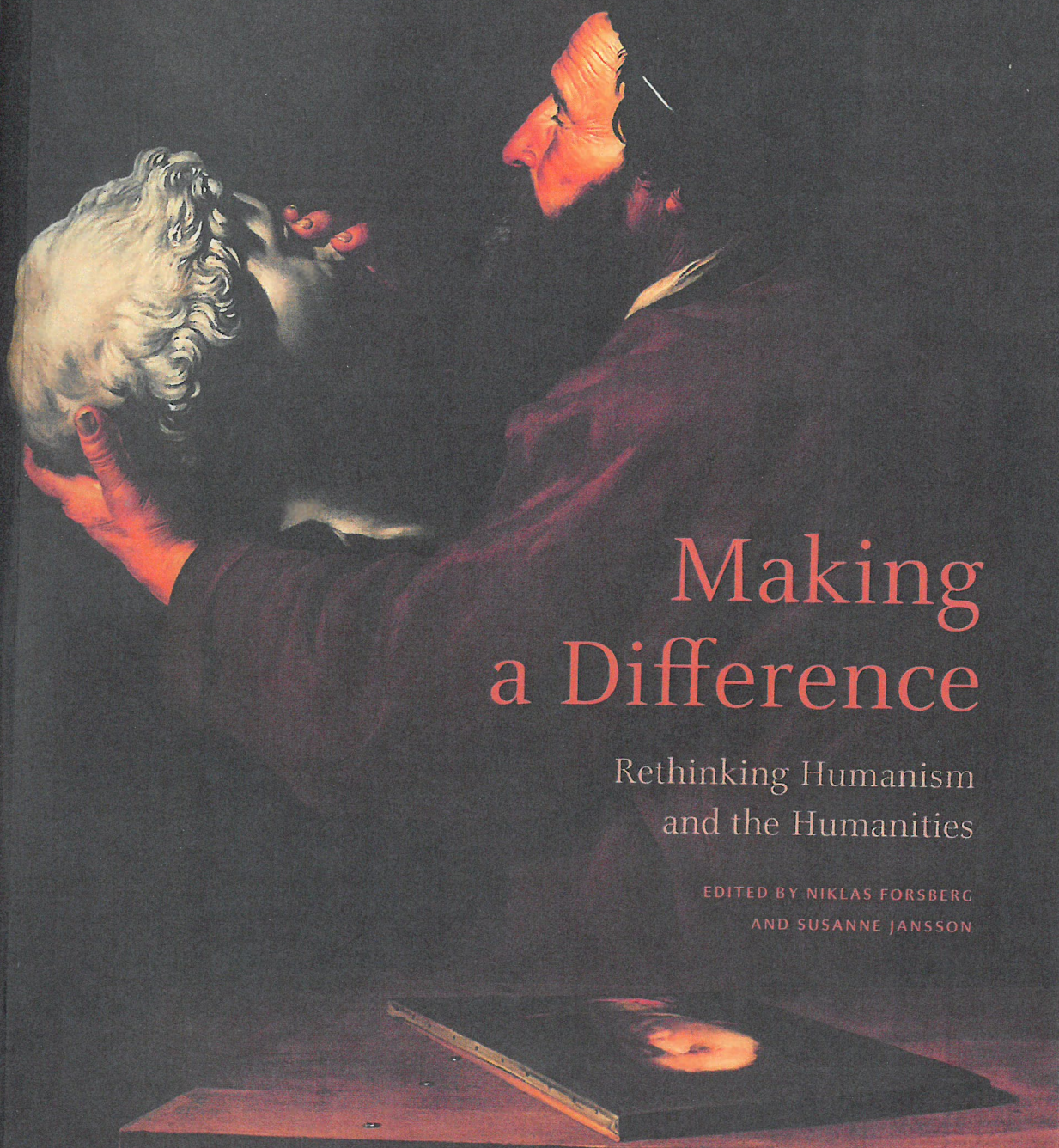
NIKLAS FORSBERG & SUSANNE JANSSON (EDS.)

THALES

# Making a Difference

Rethinking Humanism  
and the Humanities

EDITED BY NIKLAS FORSBERG  
AND SUSANNE JANSSON





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Rethinking Humanism and the Humanities

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Thales

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## On Relativism and Relativity in the Human Sciences

SHARON RIDER

### Introduction

There are a number of ways of understanding the notion of relativism. Here I will discuss one general form, namely, relativism as an umbrella term for a set of problems in and for the cultural or human sciences (historicism, intersectionality, linguistic relativity, etc). This I take to be distinct from the fact of cultural, moral or aesthetic relativity, i.e. the insight that, however self-evident our assumptions, or absolute our convictions in some matter, others may hold quite different convictions, on the basis of different assumptions, not only regarding the same matters, but regarding matters that may well be scarcely conceivable for us. This kind of relativity is something that we, as it were, run up against, as one runs into a wall. We are forced sometimes to notice what Foucault called "the stark impossibility of thinking *that*".<sup>1</sup> Or we find that all argument stops, for there is not enough upon which we agree to even grasp what it is about which we disagree. The other becomes "the Other", a kind of "dark continent" which would require years of exploration to understand.

Let me give an example, but as I said, an example of what I will not be addressing. I remember being struck as a young graduate student when I read that Spartan mothers used to send their sons off to war with the admonition: "Come back with your shield, or on it". (Returning with the shield being proof that the soldier made no attempt to flee the scene of battle swiftly by lightening his load, returning on it as proof of honorable death in battle.) And indeed I was struck by the stark impossibility of my thinking that. But this in itself says nothing about the superiority of our civilization over the Spartan (to the contrary, we cannot assess what we cannot begin to understand). To the extent that the Greeks are intelligible to us, or that our culture could be to them, we can imagine what disdain a Spartan mother could have for our decadent attitudes toward virtues such as duty, courage and self-

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sacrifice (as I understand it, the attitude they had toward the Athenians). The impossibility of my offering my son for a greater cause would simply be a sign of vice, or lack of civic virtue, in their eyes. (We might bear this in mind today, when we remonstrate, mock or just psychoanalyze mothers of suicide bombers or American soldiers, who find meaning and even solace in the heroic deaths of their children, or interpret their pride in terms intelligible for us, such as through ideology critique.) Here we have a value-relativity that will not be bridged by argument. One might call this a *tragic relativity*, a relativity that is our human fate, not our choice.

But if this is the case, what is there of importance for the human sciences to do? In short, if ideology critique, for example, is just more western Enlightenment thinking, or logocentrism, or white mythology, or grand narrative, or whatever term one likes, wherein lay the claims to validity of our philosophy, our anthropology, our historiography? When we notice that even our conceptual claims, scientific discoveries, technological advances, are inextricably bound up with any number of non-scientific, pre-logical values (such as the preference for quantitative methods over qualitative ones, for elegance and simplicity in theories, etc.), we seemed to be confronted with a choice.<sup>2</sup> One is to seek grounds for those values (this is something that has largely occupied the theory of science, for instance); or we choose not to seek grounds, on the view that there are none to be found. If this latter position is used to call into question the validity of the former, it is often termed "relativism".

In what follows, I will examine the problem of relativism as a problem in and for the humanities and social sciences. The paper is divided into two sections. In the first, I briefly describe what I take to be our present situation, using certain themes from the sociology of knowledge as my starting point. I then contrast some of the conclusions that have become commonplace, or even implicitly assumed, in response to those studies with my understanding of Max Weber's attempt to come to terms with similar tendencies a century ago. In the second section, I take up the problem of historicism as one way of formulating the relativist position, and propose an idea of scholarship, inspired by Weber, but also by Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Foucault, as a helpful way to find our way out of the bottle. Finally, I

conclude with a few remarks about the role of philosophical thinking for science and scholarship.

### Objectivity in the Human Sciences

One could say that relativism in the human sciences is a product of, but also a motor for, the recognition of a cultural/academic/political/religious/moral loss of consensus. In some fields, such as science and technology studies (STS) and Cultural studies, the view is that once we recognize the ungroundedness of academic subjects in some objective "subject matter" that is independent of the tools, traditions and institutions of knowledge, we must also concede that the university and its institutions can no longer act as the main source of knowledge production, but are relegated to "trading zones".<sup>3</sup> In a word, Lyotard's prophecy<sup>4</sup> of an increasingly dispersed knowledge society has come to fruition; it is merely a question of accepting this fact. From this perspective, the classical university and its disciplines and other institutions are parasitic on the full range of human life, and the traditional academic notion of knowledge is seen as ranging prescriptively (even in the name of description) over the resources of thinking and action intrinsically.<sup>5</sup> That is, not by accident, but by design. In short, one might say that relativism is the result of the academy coming to know itself.

There are a number of elements to this emerging awareness, many of which have been analyzed in studies in the sociology of knowledge, but I want to focus on a couple of philosophically relevant dimensions. One of these has been termed "loss of transgenerational memory", and it is linked to our contemporary cultural impatience (for social progress and increased tolerance, fair treatment and better opportunities for women and minorities, sustainable development, etc). Steve Fuller notes that this impatience leads to a sense that universalist projects were just a mistake from the outset (due, for example, to a faulty "totalizing" conception of gender, disregarding just how much better things have gotten in this regard, or to a naive European ethnocentrism, disregarding what a modern, urban and intellectualist identity that is). What is interesting about this point is that it shows how a cultural *mood* can not only color but even give rise to certain

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forms of conceptualization. (In a Nietzschean fashion, one could probably read the history of western thought through the mood of the period conveyed in even the driest treatises.) This mood of impatience is at the same time an expression of alienation, resignation and world-weariness, in which even the hope of getting things right (knowledge) or making them right (politics) doesn't even feel like a genuine possibility. Thus we make the best out of being "born too late", as Nietzsche would say, and either revel in our distance to the object of study (this is the point of Latour's method of "following the actants"), or jump theoretical hurdles and do methodological somersaults to justify our attempts to give voice to the unsaid (that is, to justify our speaking in the name of the Other – the oppressed, voices silenced by official history, etc.).

Bloor<sup>6</sup> and Latour & Woolgar<sup>7</sup>, whose early works had a decisive influence on the development of contemporary sociology of knowledge, are seen as having revealed the captivity of "normative" philosophy of science (i.e. traditional analytic philosophy of science) to wishful thinking about the history and social life of scientific thinking. Fuller writes:

Philosophers wrote as if scientists were trying to live up to their normative ideals, even though the philosophers themselves could not agree on what those ideals were. STS showed that philosophers suffered less from bad faith than sheer credulousness [...] They [...] made the fatal mistake of believing their own hype. Like over-zealous imperialists, philosophers failed to recognize the 'made for export' quality of their own normative discourse.<sup>8</sup>

He concludes that the much-touted "scientific method" had more impact on "disciplining school children and regimenting the non-sciences" than in regulating the practices of real scientists. But does our recognition that the material, social and economic conditions of academic instruction and research are genuine conditions and not merely anecdotal background mean that those conditions are the sum and substance of scientific inquiry? In what respect does the recognition of conceptual relativity force us to accept the thesis of relativism?

In an often-cited speech to students, Max Weber likened the polymorphous complexity of modern European civilization to ancient polytheism,

and suggested that there are limitations as to what science can achieve in addressing this fact of modern life:

We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanted of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted and denuded of its mystical but inward plasticity. Fate, and certainly not "science", holds sway of these gods and their struggles. One can only understand what the godhead is for the one order or for the other, or better, what godhead is in the one or in the other order. With this understanding however, the matter has reached its limit so far as it can be discussed in a lecture-room and by a professor. Yet the great and vital problem that is contained therein is, of course, very far from being concluded. But forces other than university chairs have their say in this matter.<sup>9</sup>

In much literature in the sociology of knowledge, there is an emphasis on the researcher as a member or, representative for, a collective (his time, his field, his country, his department, his research group). But if we grant the point that thinking, however communal, linguistically formed and culturally specific, nonetheless occurs in the individual as individual, then we can allow for the possibility of the scholar, researcher or teacher striving, that is, quite simply doing his or her best, to leave the values that may very well be the motivation, aim and source of inspiration for her scientific activity, out of that activity (teaching and research). Now that is a value itself, of course. But according to Weber, this is the *sine qua non* of the scientific impulse. In the case of science, it is the *supreme value* insofar as we are working as scientists (in scholarship, insofar as we are working as scholars, etc.). Weber claims that a good scientific study is one which can be read and understood by someone whose values were completely alien to those of the author(s) and, even if the knowledge gained were deemed useless, pointless, banal or even harmful by this reader, he should be able to judge the validity of those useless, pointless, banal or harmful results. If this radically alien reader understands enough of the question guiding an inquiry to judge it as uninteresting or foolish, he can also judge the answer

to be adequate or value.

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[t]he transcendent that we are culture deliberate attitude significance may existence in its light meaningful. What have cultural significance interest.<sup>10</sup>

Objectivity then not the promise is fact if it were; into a scientific fact, but thought here is the humanity, *can strive* investigation in science study play no determinant there is no such thing ideology. Weber to save the ideal, and still possible to natural sciences. But

What stand should goes beyond the religion must be raised science, hence, to disciples. To raise total life of human



to be adequate or inadequate as an answer to that question, whatever its value.

It is not entirely clear if this objectivity sought is "real" for Weber; my impression is that he sees it as a kind of regulative ideal, but one that is prerequisite for their being knowledge at all:

[t]he transcendental presupposition of every cultural science lies [...] in the fact that we are cultural beings, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it significance. Whatever this significance may be, it will lead us to judge certain phenomena of human existence in its light and to respond to them as being (positively or negatively) meaningful. Whatever may be the content of this attitude – these phenomena have cultural significance for us and on this significance alone rests its scientific interest.<sup>10</sup>

Objectivity then is the promise of genuine intersubjectivity, whether or not the promise is ever fulfilled in practice (for we could hardly know for a fact if it were; intersubjectivity is not a fact about the world in the sense of a scientific fact, but rather a pre-condition for their being such facts). The thought here is that we who are interested in human culture, by virtue of our humanity, *can strive* to ascertain the significance of the phenomena under investigation in such a way that our own values with regard to the object of study play no determining role in the *results* of our inquiry. If we can not, there is no such thing as a scientific study, there is only politics, rhetoric and ideology. Weber thinks that by admitting the limitations of science, he can save the ideal, and therewith, the practice. In other words, he thinks that it is still possible to take the idea of science seriously, even with regard to the cultural sciences. But that means self-critically examining its nature. He asks:

What stand should one take? Has 'progress' as such a recognizable meaning that goes beyond the technical, so that to serve it is a meaningful vocation? The question must be raised. But this is no longer merely the question of man's calling for science, hence, the problem of what science as a vocation means to its devoted disciples. To raise this question is to ask for the vocation of science within the total life of humanity. What is the value of science?<sup>11</sup>

His answer seems to be fundamentally Kantian: science is possible as an idea, a goal, an aim. And it is this idea that should guide practice, not faith in a given theory or method. Here Weber has a very different sort of faith in science than one normally associated with advocates of "scientific method". It seems to me that sociologists of science often implicitly agree with the very positivist spirit that they criticize: they accept the notion that the essence of science lay in its methods. And having shown that these methods do not live up to their own claims to universality, they take themselves to have shown that "science is as science does". But those social scientists, philosophers, linguists, etc. who retain a strong faith in science as a universal method, develop and cluster themselves in areas of specialization, theoretical and methodological cottage industries, which they work to advance and expand, in competition with other fractions ("networks"), thus behaving exactly in accordance with the picture of science as primarily a social, political and economic activity portrayed in much sociology of science. Weber's trust in the idea of social and cultural science, on the other hand, explicitly accepts methodological "polytheism" as a fact of scientific life, as long as it serves the higher ideal, without which we are left with a formless heap of methods, -isms, schools, techniques and tools without aim and without end, a scientifically irresponsible eclecticism. But, like Husserl, he argues that the justification of the ideal of science is not something that can be provided by science itself. Thus while he discusses the various practical benefits of value-neutrality in teaching and research, his argument for leaving values out of science is ultimately *moral*.

Here I will use what I take to be a Weberian distinction between science as a means and science as an end in itself, between the interest and values that guide the questions we ask, and the scientific goal of understanding, clarity, and seeing what is the case (or, to use a quaint little word, seeking *truth*). This is actually a very difficult thought, despite its apparent simplicity, because it entails, among other things, that scientific results turn out to be the means, and the activity of science, the proper end:

In science, each of us knows that what he has accomplished will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years. That is the fate to which science is subjected; it is the

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very *meaning* of scientific work, to which it is devoted in a quite specific sense, as compared with other spheres of culture for which in general the same holds. Every scientific "fulfillment" raises new "questions", it asks to be surpassed and outdated. Whoever wishes to serve science has to resign himself to this fact. Scientific works certainly can last as "gratifications" because of their artistic quality, or they may remain important as a means of training. Yet they will be surpassed scientifically – let that be repeated – for it is our common fate and, more, our common goal. We cannot work without hoping that others will advance further than we have. In principle, this progress goes on *ad infinitum*. And with this we come to inquire into the *meaning* of science. For, after all, it is not self-evident that something subordinate to such a law is sensible and meaningful in itself.<sup>12</sup>

One is inclined today to roll one's eyes at such expressions of devotion to the essence and value of scientific thinking, and to view it with the same suspicion with which one responds to the sort of outdated scientific optimism of, say, Karl Popper. But Weber's point is radically different. Weber sees our contemporary situation, the conditions of our real lives, as the singular condition for all social and cultural science. And naturally, that situation will, for each and every one of us, differ with regard to experiences, values and assumptions. But the very particularity of our lives, our familiarity with a common world, is what makes it possible for us to study culture or society at all; it is the condition for whatever more general claims we make about historical developments, ethnological differences, and so forth. Which is all to say that the scientific study of culture begins in specific questions arising out of a certain way of life, and the discourses and practices involved in it; the problems addressed by the social and cultural sciences ought to be the kinds of questions and concerns that someone might actually have, simply by virtue of sharing that way of life and reflecting upon it. What happens often enough in the humanities today, however, is that the questions addressed are so arcane, so internal to the scientific activity itself, that is, so integrated with a certain assemblage of established doctrines and the debates and technical issues arising out of these, that the original question to which these theories and techniques

were originally formulated as partial answers, is long lost. But recalling the question of the value of the scientific endeavor, the justification of the social and cultural sciences cannot be the practice itself. Medicine does not raise the question whether or not a certain life should be saved, aesthetics does not ask if there should be works of art. And

[w]ho – aside from certain big children who are indeed found in the natural sciences – still believes that the findings of astronomy, biology, physics or chemistry could teach us anything about the meaning of the world?<sup>13</sup>

But more relevant to our purposes,

Consider the historical and cultural sciences. They teach us how to understand and interpret political, artistic, literary and social phenomena in terms of their origins. But they give us no answer to the question, whether the existence of these cultural phenomena have been *worthwhile*. And they do not answer the further question whether it is worth the effort required to know them. They presuppose that there is an interest in partaking, through this procedure, of the community of “civilized men”. But they cannot prove “scientifically” that this is the case; and that they presuppose this interest by no means proves that it goes without saying. In fact it is not at all self-evident.<sup>14</sup>

It is important here to recall that it is not the individual scholar who finds the object of study “worthwhile” as a matter of personal preference. Rather, there must be some living concern in a culture which impels the researcher in virtue of his humanity to devote himself to the scientific study of that problem or question. Weber distinguishes between science as an inward calling and the external conditions for science. Notice that the distinction is not between scientific thinking as a method and the *de facto* conditions of science (i.e., the distinction between context of discovery and context of justification), but between the activities of the researcher or teacher *qua* academic, and the reasons for his being one, the kind of world in which someone might be inclined to choose to be a scholar or scientist. Thus, the difference between a scientific approach and a non-scientific approach is fundamentally a difference of the individual’s attitude or intention, even if these can only arise under certain cultural conditions. But because of the

perpetual movement of one’s own scientific activity, the external necessity of transformation into a technical spirit, individual scientific activities, avoiding itself for studying philosophy in the sense of accomplishing only of his own concepts, of his not out of his own kinds of conditional and economic things of concern and it is this priority of science and science but it also seems essential for the education and idea,

Following Weber, the sciences which are cultural and cognitive have the purpose of understanding (history, literature, sociology, cultural studies) as we see more clearly in history, their own cannot tell us what we think, but ideal matters (for example, we not have the intention). On the other hand, human science



perpetual movement toward increased specialization, to feel confidence in one's own scientific achievements, the scientist is prone to internalize this external necessity. One consequence of this development, I would say, is the transformation of what Weber characterizes as the scientific spirit into a technical spirit, in which the means of science become the ends, even in the individual scientist. For the individual teacher or researcher in the humanities, avoiding strict specialization, remaining true to his original motivation for studying philosophy, psychology or anthropology, means sacrificing this sense of accomplishment. It means remaining in doubt as to the value, not only of his own work, but of the shared tools and techniques, theories and concepts, of his discipline. In so doing, he attends to the questions that arise, not out of his areas of expertise, but out of his humanity. So there are two kinds of conditions for scientific work: material, social, political, organizational and economic, on the one hand, and the human impetus to get clear on things of concern, on the other. The first leads inevitably to specialization, and it is this principle that seems to guide out contemporary understanding of science and scholarship. This is surely something that we have to accept, but it also seems to me that we have lost sight of the second, and that it is essential for the survival of the humanities and social sciences, both as institution and idea, that we re-discover it.

Following Weber, we can allow for a unity of purpose to the human sciences which does not stand in opposition to the fact of historical, cultural and cognitive relativity, at least not necessarily. One might say that the purpose of the human sciences is precisely to remind us of who we were (history, literature, etc.), indicate where we may be headed (economics, sociology, cultural studies, political science etc.), and, perhaps above all, help us see more clearly how certain standard accepted notions have their own history, their own purpose(s), which can and do change. The human sciences cannot tell us what we ought to do, how we ought to act, or what we should think, but ideally, they can help us to reflect critically for ourselves on these matters (for example, by showing that a certain course of action will likely not have the intended results, due to certain laws of economics, for instance). On the other hand, the more programmatic, politicized and ideological the human sciences become, explicitly or implicitly, the less likely it is that they

will fulfill this vital purpose. And not because there is a single Truth toward which all scientific or scholarly thinking is aimed at revealing, but precisely because there is not.

### Relativism, Philosophy and the Limits of Theory<sup>15</sup>

If we can no longer take seriously generalized discourses about “human nature”, for example, are we forced to accept relativism as a starting-point for humanist studies? Again, I would say that we may very well bump up against the fact of historical relativity (for instance, the inherent difficulty in grasping texts produced in periods very different from our own), but this is a fact of our lives as working academics, not a general thesis. We do not have to advocate a relativist view, simply by virtue of the failure of ahistorical, universalist thinking. We can grant a number of historicist assertions about particular cases, without embracing historicism as such, that is, we may grant its point as critique in any number of contexts, without granting it as a philosophical thesis or doctrine.<sup>16</sup> Historicism construed as a general thesis (the thesis of historical relativism) assumes rather *in advance* of the formulation of any specific problem that the problem *ought* to be formulated as primarily one of historical context. But shouldn’t we first get clear about what it is that we want to know before assuming an historicist stance?

As critique, historicist works mostly describe the *de facto* conditions under which past thinkers worked, the intellectual debate of the period, the connotations of certain terms and ideas in a given epoch and so forth. The motivation behind such studies is the need to respond to, correct or modify the prevalent practice, especially in intradisciplinary historiographies, of treating thinkers of the past as if there were no such conditions, as if scientists and philosophers did not in fact write in a certain context and not another, but only in the highly refined air of scientific, philosophical discourse (the boundaries of which are, oddly enough, determined *ex post facto* in terms of research interests today that have often enough evolved over the last hundred years). As such, historicism describes a practice the value of which is demonstrated in the relative success or failure of such attempts to reveal inadequacies in the narratives they aim to supplement or undermine.

As an epistemology (as all forms of thinking of questions are for granted, gives a kind of relativist framework (if she cannot coherently discuss the whole, and thus arguing, say, that characterized by an body, sexuality and conclusion, we see

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As an epistemological thesis or starting-point, however, resolute historicism (as all forms of strong relativism) is clearly problematic. First, the prioritizing of questions concerning cultural bias, for example, is often simply taken for granted, given the historicist starting-point. The historicist position provides a kind of metaphysical justification for posing certain questions, and simply disregarding others, as those become nonsensical within the historicist framework (if one accepts the historicist thesis as a universal principle, she cannot coherently argue that, say, Kant's description of women as intrinsically timid and incapable of principled thought and action is incorrect). Second, it presumes that one can say something sensible about a culture as a whole, and thus moves from being a *modus operandi* to an ontology (by arguing, say, that the development of European intellectual history is characterized by an all-embracing rationalist culture deriving from fear of the body, sexuality and women). If we follow this line of thought to its natural conclusion, we seem to be forced to embrace one of the following, conclusions:

Past thinkers (or agents) were limited by the culture they inhabited. Because of our historical distance, we can see more clearly the conditions that formed their thinking than they could.

We, as thinkers (or agents) are limited by the culture we inhabit. Therefore, whatsoever we take ourselves to understand of other cultures are in fact own cultural projections.

But what is it that makes us reticent to accept such drastic formulations without reservation? I would say that one lesson to be drawn from our disinclination to accept either proposition as it stands is that our own experience inoculates us from such theoretical extremism in scholarly practice (although not in theory). We cannot do research on the basis of the first thesis, because it leads inexorably to the second. Our own cultural products, including the results of our research, will also come to be seen from an historical distance. That is, they will be interpreted in terms of the cultural conditions for their production: conditions to which we are blind. The second thesis denies explicitly any other possibility, that is, it is a straightforward statement of

epistemological value-nihilism. We are incapable of doing research on the basis of either of the claims above (just as there are no whole-hearted atheists in foxholes, so too there are no whole-hearted relativists in archives). In practice, general theories about the conditions for knowledge are too general to have any use.

One way of dealing with historicist claims is to treat them as something that must be decided from case to case, issue to issue. We cannot, in advance of inquiry, decide, for instance, that either (i) there is no such thing as sex and death *per se*, but only different cultural practices of, say, courtship and religious mysticism, or (ii) there is only copulation and expiration, and these are the basis for various arbitrary cultural expressions such as marriage and religious institutions. The question of the constancy of human nature can only be decided in the context of a much more specified question, and with respect to a predetermined and presumably narrow use of the notion of constancy. As a hermeneutic principle, this means that the extent to which ancient texts, for example, are intelligible or unintelligible to modern discourse is simply the extent to which they are intelligible or unintelligible. The question is, what problems are you trying to solve? If an ancient text does, effectively, shed light on a problem, then it is apparently intelligible in the relevant sense (even if only to very few), namely, to those have similar problems and sufficient interest and training to be able to recognize the problem as genuinely similar): “[i]t is our perception of human nature that makes Plato and Aristotle intelligible to us.”<sup>17</sup> But to ask if such perception *in general* is an historical artifact or a part of the natural order, is to pose a question that cannot be decided once and for all. It is not a question about which we can attain clarity through further investigation.

One way of getting a hold on the sort of problems arising from our thirst for generality, is by noticing that we can be lead to accede to claims that we can hardly make sense of. For instance, the geometric notion of a line, someone might want to say, is relative to the cultural and linguistic horizon it inhabits. At first, one thinks that this must be right. It is not natural to assume that all cultures use the notion of line in all or even any of the various and sundry ways we do in English: we have clotheslines, fishing lines, county lines, telephone lines, outlines, party lines, script lines, lines

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of merchandize, lines on our faces, lines of argument, lines of thought, lines of cocaine, lines of kings, lines of work. We can be in line, on-line and, of course, out of line. And we have the mathematical definition of line as a set of points  $(x, y)$  that satisfy the linear equation  $ax + by + c = 0$  (but this is hardly the most common usage). One might think that the notion of line is so multifarious that it hardly has any coherent sense in modern English (or that English is regrettably impoverished). Yet there is clearly some sort of family resemblance between the many uses of the term in English, and it seems to have to do with extension, continuity, range, or length. So if we take extension to be a general characteristic of the ordinary, geometrical use, for example, one might ask: what would it mean to say that there are cultures in which straight lines have no length? (I chose straight lines as an example for the sake of simplicity, i.e., because "straight" also carries with it the notion of uniform, unidirectional extension.) One might imagine, for instance, that in some culture straight lines are not perceived as we perceive them; such a thought-experiment might seem to provide counter-evidence to the notion that the association between length and lines is some sort of fact about human psychology, or to a realist conception of measurement. In this respect, one might say that the attribution of length to straight lines is a convention. But what is meant by convention here? Conceptually, the relationship between length and the notion of a straight line is internal to our practices of measurement and delineation; length or extension belongs to our use of the notion of a straight line. A notion of a straight line without length would be a *different* use of the word, a different concept, than our ordinary geometrical one. Insofar as the length of straight lines is relative to and contingent upon all the practices in which we are inclined to use and talk about straight lines, one could call that use a convention. But that does not mean that it is "merely contingent" in the sense of arbitrary or optional? When the traffic police check the sobriety of suspect drivers by asking them to walk two meters along a straight line, for example, there is no room for the conceptual possibility of there being lines without length; that is to say, that conceptual possibility, in that context, is meaningless (has no use). But this remark is neither normative (it is not a prohibition against using words as one wishes) nor informative (it provides no explanation); it is a description

of a defining feature of the ordinary use of the concept “straight line”. To stress the absolute relativity of notions such as straight line is really just the flip-side of the kinds of dogmatic conceptions that seek universal properties; in both cases, one relegates the case in point to an exemplification of a theoretical construction that has been decided beforehand on the basis of other concepts and problems (usually within the discipline of philosophy).

The point of the foregoing example is to note that explanations of how we have the notion of a straight line will always rely on the shared concepts “straight” and “line”, lest they not know what it is they are explaining or disagreeing about in the first place. In fact, they would have nothing to explain (they would have no problem to pose). All empirical explanations (that is, explanations of states of affairs) rely upon shared concepts of this kind. To say that a straight line has length is to reach bedrock. It is the sort of remark that few would dream of questioning, but not because it’s an implicit or tacit theory. Rather, it is the sort of statement one arrives at when trying to define what it is that one is talking about, what it is one is trying to explain, what it is that one means. It is in a sense a “transcendental” remark, insofar as it tells us nothing that wasn’t already there with us from the moment we learned the meaning of “straight” and “line”, and which simply has no use outside of the context of such reflection. I take this to be Wittgenstein’s point when he remarks: “The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose. If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.”<sup>18</sup> The various ways we were trained to use “straight” and “line”, the nearly infinite number of circumstances at home, in the playground and even the first-grade classroom cannot be cursorily stated in a general theory without falsification or unwarranted speculation (which is not to say that such speculation and even simplification is always unwarranted. One can imagine uses for it in, for example, early childhood development studies, where one is interested in testing various methods of early instruction to improve spatial comprehension among schoolchildren).

One might want to say here that this is just a way of avoiding taking a stance: it must be the case that *either* there is natural order/universal truths/objective reality/innate ideas *or* there is only construction/fiction/narrative/



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How is this relevant to the question of historicism or relativism in the human sciences? To assert a relativist stance with regard to knowledge is to see all that we call nature and human life in scientific and scholarly inquiry as a theoretical construction; but there is also a tendency to conflate our scientific and social theories with ordinary use. The idea that ordinary language and social practice, such as what we are inclined to say and do when using "straight lines" or "mourning a death", are "theoretical constructions" in the same sense as scientific facts and discoveries can be described as constructions is often assumed without further ado. Why? One partial answer is that there is a prevalent use of the notion of nature that is a theoretical construction, namely, the "nature" of the natural sciences that is often assumed in an unspecified and fluid manner in theoretical discussion in the humanities and social sciences. Words such as "nature" and "culture" tend to play the field in theoretical discourse. Here it is tempting to cite Wittgenstein's famous remarks about bringing back words from their metaphysical to their everyday use, that is, bringing them back to the language-game which is their original home,<sup>19</sup> or rather, calling them back to work when they've gone, as Wittgenstein says, "on holiday".<sup>20</sup> This is the sense of the "extraordinary use" of words in theoretical discourse that we have to learn to resist if we are to attain clarity. But is clarity knowledge? Can we say that we "know" that straight lines have length? How could I, even in principle,



satisfactorily demonstrate that all straight lines have length? Or more to the point, how can I even begin to doubt that straight lines have some length? What would such doubt mean? In a sense, it is indubitable, because we would hardly know what it means to deny it (unless, of course, the intention was to introduce a *new* use). Thus the length of lines is not a fact about the world, but a reminder about a certain way we talk about and move around in the world. Thus it is not susceptible of proofs. Evidence and justification, after all, belong to cases in which doubt is introduced. To state the matter perversely, we can only know to be true something about which we can be wrong. I may well be right or wrong when I estimate the length of a straight line to be 7 inches; or I may measure the length in centimeters rather than inches. But does it make sense to say, "Yes, that's right. That line has length." It is difficult to imagine an instance in which that would be a meaningful answer to a question, a situation in which someone would be inclined to state that a particular line has length: no specific length, just length in general. In this respect, one does not "know" as a general proposition that straight lines have length; what we can *know* is how to use the concept of "straight line" (which, of course, can change, but not overnight. We do not change basic features of our language the way we change our shirts). But this does not open the floodgates of wholesale relativism; to accept that there are certain things regarding which there simply is no room for doubt, to admit that we have hit rock bottom, is merely to acknowledge *the limits of theory*.

It has been argued that the very idea of philosophy is obsolete.<sup>21</sup> If philosophy still has a role to play in our thinking today, it is arguably if it takes as its task to remind us of what we can make sense of and what we cannot. This means, among other things, leaving justification and meeting evidentiary demands to other disciplines. But it also means that other disciplines should not look to philosophy to provide interesting new theories about the nature of language, human thought or the world, but focus on the real problems arising in and through their own work. Cultural relativity may well be an example of the kind of problem that arises repeatedly in certain disciplines (history, anthropology), but then it is the specific nature of the problem to be addressed that requires philosophical reflection (such as "how are we to weigh and interpret the different factors involved in the out-

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break of the American Civil War, given the radically different perspectives on its causes both then and now?), not "relativism" in general. But here we have to be careful. Specification of a question or set of questions need not necessarily mean specialization. We might remind ourselves that problems having to do with the consequences of specialization, or fragmentalization, of the sciences has been with us since the early 18th-century. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the great encyclopedist Diderot complained that he could not keep up with all the latest developments in different fields and, more importantly, did not have the time to reflect upon how they all fit together. The sense that knowledge was falling apart at the seams led some, most notoriously Hegel, to argue that encyclopedic knowledge was not enough; we require an overview of the relation between sciences, i.e., a philosophical system. In the wake of the demise of faith in rational systems, there arose in the twentieth century a need for some way of conducting the human sciences that was on the one hand, relevant and useful, and on the other, made no pretences toward systematicity. It seem to me that Max Weber revitalized the human sciences simply by trying to formulate new, relevant and meaningful questions, largely disregarding traditional disciplinary boundaries in order to find helpful answers. His investigations most often begin with a problem or question, rather than a theory or methodological framework. But like Nietzsche, while he was deeply skeptical of systematization, he managed to integrate vastly different fields of inquiry in his work. Focusing on real problems is all too often construed in the humanities and social sciences today as focusing on one's problems as a representative of a certain theoretical position or discipline (one's area of expertise), that is, on the doctrines and methods which come to us ready-made, as it were, when we are working as professional anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers or historians. But uncritically employing some preferred set of methods, techniques and concepts to some presumed category within one's discipline reflects a bureaucratic, technical understanding of what constitutes a genuine problem, not a human understanding.

There has also been a great deal of discussion of late as to whether or not the very idea of humanities is obsolete, or at very least, "untimely". Most scholarship and teaching simply assume the value of the disciplines without

further reflection or argument. When pushed (by dwindling interest among students, lack of interest from funding institutions, etc), one easily falls into one of two legitimating strategies. Either one argues for the value of humanist studies in building and enhancing character, civic virtues and "critical thinking". Alternatively, one stresses the "liberating" dimension, where desired political goals and aspirations (multiculturalism, gender equality, etc.) are decisive for the form and content of study. But apparently, such defenses ring hollow to all too many, including humanists themselves, the result of which is the popularity of the "anti-humanism" and doctrinal relativism of the last few decades, even (or especially) in the academy. I think that we have to come to terms with the fundamental lack of coherence and unity of purpose in the human sciences, if the latter are to survive as a vital part of education and culture. And here it will not do to point to the consensus of the most excellent researchers at the finest universities who publish in the best journals, for that would mean implicitly accepting that the criteria for serious humanist thinking are the criteria of the professoriat seen as first and foremost a profession. But I would argue that the study of literature, philosophy and history as areas of human inquiry cannot and should not be reduced to their institutions (power structures, economic conditions, internal doctrinal disputes, networks, departments, journal rankings and funding agencies). If we ourselves cannot see a point and purpose beyond political utility or professionalism, the content of our activities will be reducible to the latter.

Certain schools of thought and institutions will, for various historical and political reasons, be more influential at any given time. That influence will have decisive consequences for what is deemed relevant and interesting. Historically speaking, however, the most radical and best thinking of an epoch is often decades ahead of academically sanctioned thinking in the humanities (this is particularly true of philosophy: think of Saussure, Nietzsche, Foucault, none of whom were professional philosophers). For this reason, it is crucial that the meaning of literature, philosophy and history as areas of human inquiry not be reduced to their institutions. Or rather, if we humanists cannot offer a compelling description of the aims and purposes of our studies that does not consist in arguments for political utility or vague

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## Notes

1. Michel Foucault (New York, 1970), p.

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3. H. Nowotny, P *Public in an Age of*

4. Jean-Francois

5. See Steve Ful *Studies* 18, no. 1 (20

6. David Bloor, K

7. B. Latour and (London, 1979).



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gestures toward some assumed shared cultural inheritance, then we are in fact admitting that the reduction is not only reasonable, but adequate. It means essentially reducing right to might, one of the first formulations of the relativist thesis. Weber's suggestion regarding how to respond to the intellectual polytheism that is our lot is to accept it as what I have called a "fact of academic life", that is, to acknowledge the conditions of our current situation. But this does not mean internalizing external necessity. Rather, it means accepting that, in the end, we are left to our own commitments and judgments, including our commitments and judgments regarding what is a relevant question to pose and which criteria to use to determine the adequacy of our answers. And that is something that requires genuine human reflection, not "research".<sup>22</sup>

### Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), Preface, p. xv.
2. I use the example of "qualitative versus quantitative research" with some hesitation. In point of fact, the prevalence of the notion that certain methods are "qualitative", while others are "quantitative", deserves more careful consideration. What is meant by the distinction is, of course, that certain technical methods are constructed to yield mathematical results, such as statistics, whereas the products of discourse analyses, close readings, biographical and comparative studies, most forms of exegesis and so forth do not lend themselves to quantification. That is, the objects and the results of such research are qualitative, rather than quantitative. The claim that the humanities and certain forms of social science have their own set of methods, distinct from *but comparable to*, those of the "hard sciences" seems primarily to serve a legitimating function. Many of these "methods" are not actually methods at all, but theoretical reflections upon method (hermeneutics, deconstruction, phenomenology, etc.).
3. H. Nowotny, P. Scott and M. Gibbons, *Re-thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, 2000).
4. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979; Minneapolis, 1983).
5. See Steve Fuller, "Is STS truly revolutionary or merely revolting?", *Science Studies* 18, no. 1 (2005).
6. David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (London, 1976).
7. B. Latour and B. Wolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (London, 1979).



8. Fuller, "Is STS truly revolutionary or merely revolting?", p. 79.
9. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation", in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. & ed. (1919; New York, 1946), p. 148.
10. Max Weber, "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy", in Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1949), p. 81.
11. Weber, "Science as a Vocation", p. 140.
12. Ibid., p. 138.
13. Ibid., p. 142.
14. Ibid., p. 145.
15. An earlier version of parts of the following section of this paper appeared in "Where my Spade Turns: On Philosophy, Nihilism and the Ordinary", in *Eros and Logos: Essays Honoring Stanley Rosen*, ed. N. Ranasinghe (South Bend, 2006), pp. 229–45.
16. Here Reinhart Koselleck's historicizing of historical thinking in *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Boston, 1988) is relevant. The historical coincidence of the development of "historical thinking" in the modern sense and the advent of "critique" is a useful reminder to us that we are not nearly as self-critical in our perpetual gesturing to "historical contingency" as some kind of neutral fact as we ought to be.
17. Stanley Rosen, *Metaphysics in Ordinary Experience* (New Haven, 1999), p. 221.
18. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1958), §127, §128.
19. Ibid., §116.
20. Ibid., §38.
21. For an overview, see *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, eds. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy (1987; Cambridge, MA, 1996).
22. I would like to thank Sören Stenlund and Pär Segerdahl for valuable comments and suggestions.

## Seeing the Future Retroactive Reflection MARTIN GUSTAFSSON

In chapter 17 of *Sciences of Memory* we should best view the indeterminate.<sup>1</sup> of the past as fixed human conduct view. This suggests *Human Sciences* what it means to man affairs. In particular differences to redescription's by sciences often in the debate is clear goals and methods what we may learn

**1. Hacking on Past**  
What Hacking develops new ways of description that we can see how sciences get described of which are described by Alexander Mack in the 19th century. He married a girl of forty having treated the