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# 3 The methods of the humanities and social sciences

Against this background, we wish to disclose the already existing potential of the humanities and social sciences to create meaningful contributions to trans-sectoral research regarding the urgent challenges of the 21st century. By repositioning the humanities and social sciences in context, our aim is to reconfigure as well as to expand all the solutions drawn by current debates. In need of fundamentally new ideas as well as reshaped concepts, scholarly research generally requires a deeper ability to reflect on itself, its methods, the interaction between disciplines, as well as its connectivity to other sectors of society (politics, business, the arts, civil society) and their specific needs. Taking responsibility for co-creating approaches to viable solutions requires complementing the stage of social critique (without ignoring its analytical tools) with constructive contributions that draw positive as well as captivating imaginaries. This imaginary must always start from a critical analysis and questioning of prevailing problem descriptions. And when it comes to unfolding innovative perspectives, establishing a high-trust culture of creativity – individually and institutionally – is key.

## Broad concept of humanities and social sciences

Historically, the humanities and social sciences have evolved based on socially accepted modes of shaping one's character. They originate from attempts to make the principles of character formation explicit in the form of rules of wisdom, catalogues of virtues, as well as literary and artistic representations of socially important affairs.

Of course, what we call 'the humanities and social sciences' originates and develops in different ways depending on local histories and value representations. Thus, there are as many histories of those disciplines as there are systematic attempts to make the foundational values of a given social order explicit by way of symbolic representation. We note, however, that some alternative knowledges have been glossed over to the extent that the so-called subaltern has been

denied the means – the categories of representation – to speak and be heard,<sup>6</sup> leading to a situation of ‘hermeneutical injustice’.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that there is *value-knowledge* and *wisdom* which differs from physical or natural-scientific knowledge concerning anonymous, material-energetic processes in the cosmos (i.e. anti-reductionism) has been a decisive component in the development of the humanities. When, in Athenian democracy of the 5th century BC, the need for the education of well-informed citizens arose in what would later become Europe, philosophers and political thinkers started to discuss appropriate educational programmes. Thus, democracy in Athens promoted learning and innovation to an extent hitherto unknown.<sup>8</sup> The curricula under discussion were not confined to intellectual skills, but included what has been called ‘virtue of character’.<sup>9</sup> The personal ideal individuals had to pursue was *kalokagathia*, a term that combines outstanding intellectual competence with several further desirable character traits. In this original context, the humanities and the social sciences (such as economics and politics, as developed by Aristotle) serve the function of developing virtues, and thereby foster the ethical life of society. This is not only true of the humanities and social sciences in the so-called ‘West’. Systematic ways of achieving wisdom, social stability, and prosperity were developed in Chinese and Indian contexts as well as in the complex histories of the African continent that heavily influenced the development of a scholarly attitude towards nature and human beings via the Egyptian paradigm.

Virtue ethics and its educational programmes later produced models of a ‘comprehensive formation’ (*enkuklios paideia*, an expression that survived in our word ‘encyclopedia’) and ‘liberal arts’ (*artes liberales*). Certain disciplines were considered ‘free’ in the sense of being valuable for free citizens and their happiness; as Aristotle described it, *sophia* (wisdom) is this type of knowledge since, being about ‘first principles’, it is valuable in itself, not for further purposes. It thereby becomes the prototype of the very idea of an end in itself, something intrinsically valuable.

A form of value-knowledge irreducible to the kind of objective knowledge we possess concerning nature stands at the core of each *emancipatory* movement that aims to foster personal autonomy and social freedom alike. In the so-called Western tradition, we can speak of a ‘Greek enlightenment’ as the source of the humanities.

While Aristotle and many of his contemporary scholars believed that slavery was an inevitable aspect of a free society and that women were morally deficient, emancipatory knowledge has progressed over the millennia. One of the forces of moral and human progress has been precisely the emancipatory knowledge stemming from the humanities and social sciences – more recently by pointing out the need to decolonize many of our assumptions about human becoming, which is an important element for viable accounts of universalizing in the 21st century. To be sure, moral progress has never been steady, linear, or unequivocal, nor is it anywhere near its end. The fruits of actual emancipatory imagination and knowledge certainly have not been fully realized, as ongoing humanistic debates and social-scientific research concerning systemic racism, hidden slavery, explicit misogyny, and social violence in contexts of ‘race’, sex, gender, class, national identity, and so forth clearly demonstrate.<sup>10</sup>

From Aristotle to Hannah Arendt, the humanities have drawn on considerations concerning practical reason (*phronesis*). *Phronesis* is a term for the context-sensitive faculty of goal-setting and goal-pursuing that takes into account a wide range of values and facts, life conditions, and accidental circumstances, and connects them with the good or happy life of humans (*eudaimonia*). The false ideology of today’s *homo oeconomicus* appears today as a ‘rational fool’<sup>11</sup> since he neglects his deeper and wider interests in life – an insight widely recognized in economics, which has realized that human agency is profoundly shaped by morally relevant value representations irreducible to an articulation of individual preferences. *Phronesis*, by contrast, is conceived of as an ability to provide a comprehensive rational orientation on goods and evils and to rightly prioritize them. The prudent person (the *phronimos*) thereby develops a global overview encompassing what is good for the city as a collective locus of social self-determination and autonomy.

In a more technical sense, the humanities began to develop specific methods designed to make their knowledge acquisition objectively shareable during the Hellenistic period. The method adopted for understanding the Homeric epics was based on Aristotle’s idea of ‘epistemic pluralism’. This is part of the genealogy of hermeneutic methods of understanding cultural and mental differences encoded in both oral and literal modes of expression. As Aristotle claims, we are not entitled to reduce all cognitively valuable procedures to

a single methodological standard (to the standard nowadays associated with the dominant Anglophone meaning of 'science' as technoscience). Instead, we should rather acknowledge that the epistemic standards for, e.g., mathematical proofs, logical arguments, poetological analysis of literary works of art and morally valid norms are highly different. In the case of textual interpretations, one must apply a method that carefully takes into consideration linguistic deviations, historical diversity, and the nature of the human being (emotions, desires, needs, attitudes, virtues, and vices, etc.).

In the modern German-speaking context, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey coined the conceptual dichotomy between explaining (*Erklären*) and understanding (*Verstehen*), which can be interpreted as a distinction between two complementary modes of relating to reality.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the former characterizes scientific methods designed to identify nomological regularities in 'natural' reality independent of mind, language, and theory, the latter contextualizes historical documents by locating them in their original sphere. One of Dilthey's most relevant contributions to hermeneutics (the theory of understanding and self-understanding) is his description of the culturally shared sphere in which individuals are embedded from their earliest childhood. Understanding the details of a given historical text means grasping this sphere and integrating its details into a coherent narrative.

This hermeneutical approach of the humanities was further developed by Max Weber. Weber formulated an action theory emphasizing that to understand something is to place it in a 'context of meaningfulness' (*Sinnzusammenhang*). For this reason, the humanities and the social sciences are deeply interwoven in that they take value representation and value judgements into account without thereby immediately accepting them as objectively valid.<sup>13</sup>

It was Edmund Husserl who, in the late 1920s, coined the concept of 'lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt*), which plays a prominent role in contemporary social thought.<sup>14</sup> On its basis, Husserl was able to unify his phenomenological theories of the experience of consciousness of space, time, other minds, the body, etc. Finally, we have in Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricœur, fully fledged philosophical standpoints based on the hermeneutical idea of understanding human existence. These philosophers leave behind the Husserlian idea of transcendental subjectivity and adopt a thoroughly historical paradigm of

the human life form. They attack a description of human existence which takes a theoretical attitude towards the world as our primary view.<sup>15</sup>

All these standpoints attribute a privileged role to the humanities vis-à-vis our capacity to lead our lives in light of a conception of ourselves.<sup>16</sup> For them, only the humanities can provide a non-reductive picture of our lives and of human becoming based on specific methods designed to make sense of our human sensemaking in its social and historical context.

To be sure, there is a multitude of histories of the humanities and social sciences that are entangled with each other. Humanistic concepts travel, in a way that often reflects balances of power, across continents and disciplines. Making this explicit is part and parcel of the methods of the humanities.<sup>17</sup> All intellectual traditions emerging from the axial age and its preconditions in *longue durée* oral histories provide us with ways to discuss existential issues of human life.

### Need for value-laden approaches

The methods of the humanities, as we find them, can be integrated into normatively guided social change through the idea that they are instrumental in figuring out value facts. For the human standpoint, subjectivity is vital to any account of experience which underpins claims to political participation.

It is a mistake to draw a sharp ontological line between facts and values. Max Weber was one of the authorities who introduced the idea of such a separation in order to keep empirical social sciences free from evaluative judgements that presuppose, as he believed, certain subjective ideological, political, or religious standpoints. In his influential papers on the 'Objectivity of Social Sciences and Socio-political Knowledge'<sup>18</sup> and his 'Science as Vocation',<sup>19</sup> Weber formulated his plea for value-free research that should pave the way for politicians to make, in a second, independent step, value-based decisions. The task of the social scientist is then restricted to the identification of facts; it is not to give concrete advice by making specific normative recommendations. Weber saw it as impossible to speak of moral values in an objective and neutral sense – whereas our assumption is that value-driven forms of research in sciences and humanities do not undermine their objectivity but simply cannot (and should not) be avoided.

The sharp distinction between facts and values is usually traced back to David Hume. As Hume claimed, no valid normative conclusion can be derived from a set of factual premises. For quite a long time, Hume's Is–Ought-problem (also known as Hume's guillotine) has been seen as dividing reality into two disjointed realms. According to this view, there exists no way to get from facts to values and vice versa. Facts are derived from a world-to-mind attitude, whereas values are in our minds and are applied to objects in a mind-to-world attitude.

But already in the early 1980s Hilary Putnam attacked the fact-value distinction in his influential book *Reason, Truth, and History*. He rejected the view that, since evaluative statements presuppose values, they can only be subjective.<sup>20</sup> He strongly supported the view that values can be the topic of objective debate, especially with regard to what the idea of 'human flourishing' implies.

Claiming the superiority of normative approaches over empirical ones is just as wrong as the opposite. Normative approaches are replete with factual assumptions and implicit causal claims. Conversely, no empirical inquiry is value-neutral, if only because it requires an account of what to look for and why. Questions relating to how empirical inquiry is conducted are also replete with normative choices and assumptions – and we don't mean only obvious examples of ethical limits to experiments. No facts 'carry their meaning along with themselves on their face' (Dewey 1954: 3). They require interpretation and the humanities for reflection and sensemaking. Reductionism must be avoided on all sides: Facts don't speak for themselves and yet they are more than projections of biases and normative preferences. Avoiding reductionism is a demand of scientific inquiry, of multi-disciplinarity, and of the need for radical societal change in view of overlapping crises.

The inevitability of value judgement is not only characteristic of the humanities and social sciences. It also applies to science and engineering. The reason why we focus on the humanities and social sciences here is not to exclude science and engineering, but rather to shift the level of observation and human activity from the field of intervening in natural processes by way of technology to the position of shifting mindsets. In a famous telegram from 1946, Albert Einstein wrote 'let the people know that a new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels'

(Nathan and Hordon 1960: 376). While he was speaking about the unleashed power of nuclear physics, the current crises are no less imminent (and still involve the issue of nuclear power). Changing mindsets in the right way for the sake of adjusting our behaviour and reconfiguring our institutions requires the kind of reflexive inquiry characteristic of the humanities and social sciences.

### Pluralism of methods and approaches

The humanities and social sciences are sometimes seen as following a 'weaker' theoretical and methodological paradigm than the technosciences. But this judgement rests upon an early modern prejudice concerning the role of mathematics and experiential methods for the constitution of 'exact' sciences. Against such prejudices one should keep in mind the genuine diversity of epistemic fields – a diversity unearthed by humanistic disciplines such as the history of science or the sociology of knowledge. The insight that methods cannot simply be transferred from one domain to the other and that a researcher should stick to an appropriate method for a specific domain of objects can be traced back to Aristotle: he points out that the procedure adopted by a mathematician cannot be transmitted to the art of rhetoric and vice versa.

There is an old philosophical debate between epistemic monism and pluralism: while, on the one hand, Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, and philosophers and scientists associated with the Vienna School defended the idea that all epistemic methodologies can ultimately be reduced to one single procedural standard, one finds, from Aristotle to Nancy Cartwright and beyond, the idea that scientific disciplines and their methodologies cannot be unified. We think that monism implies a dangerous sort of reductionism that should be avoided, as it undermines the very idea of objectivity in the humanities and delegates value-knowledge to expressions of vital preferences or mere aesthetics. Given the contemporary state of the art in the natural sciences, the idea of subsuming all of them under some unified scientific view (*Einheitswissenschaft*) is fundamentally mistaken. The very idea of reducing humanistic, historically, and socially embedded value-knowledge and wisdom to the level of natural processes under investigation in 'science' is fundamentally misguided and certainly not grounded in actual scientific knowledge.

## Decentering and multi-perspectivity

One of the major lessons of the various movements of critical theories in the last decades is that the humanities and social sciences make progress by decentralizing power positions that stabilize ultimately untenable forms of dualism and asymmetry based on privileging one polar extreme of a dualism. Deconstruction, postcolonial studies, disability studies, gender theories, post-structuralism, critical race theory, systems theory, and so forth have clearly demonstrated how knowledge fields are fanned out into a plurality of normative spheres governed by parameters such as power, economic interest, potentially harmful genealogies, biases, and social asymmetries. Eurocentrism, economism, ecocentrism, anthropocentrism, sinocentrism, and so forth designate untenable modes of organizing the relationship between highly complex normative spheres.<sup>21</sup> We accept these lessons as we move to a constructive, value-driven self-conception of the humanities and social sciences.

Any enterprise aiming to defend a project based on what we have in common, and which can be universalized, must have learned the lessons of history and know that any claim to define the good in a dogmatic way is prone to lead to the kind of violence it sets out to avoid. Thus, value judgements and objectivity in the humanities and social sciences is, of course, not insulated from fallibility and the possibility of correcting knowledge claims. Claims to knowledge must constantly reflect their relationship with power and its manifestation in belief systems and knowledge production. The value-laden investigation into a given set of value representations delivers defeasible claims. The defeasibility of claims to binding validity does not undermine but rather strengthens their objectivity. Claiming knowledge is not, as such, dogmatism.

Objective claims are precisely those which can be right or wrong. They need not be about objective matters in the sense of mind- and language-independent material-energetic reality. Objective judgement can have subjective experience as its target. In order to assess validity claims, humans need a community of diverse perspectives on the same facts so as to arrive at justified conclusions concerning what they actually know and ought to do. The defeasibility of knowledge claims in value domains, thus, amounts neither to the dogmatic defence of one's preferred narrative or prior commitments, nor to the kind of postmodern relativism and historicism

which challenges the very idea of knowledge in the normative domain.

The way in which we represent social affairs is always already value-laden. In that respect, there is no Archimedean point, no value-free 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1989). Rather, following a recent proposal by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, we ought to think of the humanities and social sciences as striving for a view from everywhere.<sup>22</sup> Considered in this way, the humanities provide a systematic, methodological foundation for representing values. For, the target systems of their investigations are historically located expressions of values belonging to different layers of normativity. Their modes of knowledge-acquisition are irreducible to a value-neutral description of social affairs. In order to achieve this, new narratives must be the result of transcultural, trans-sectoral, and interdisciplinary cooperation. We might also say that the fact of every starting point being invariably partial does not mean that this is where one must end up.<sup>23</sup> The goal of a novel research and communication architecture is to face the global challenges of our planet head-on by bringing the humanities to the table.

The humanities have long dealt with multi-perspectivity in the following strong sense: Whereas the natural and technological sciences on many levels are perfectly entitled to think of their objects as for the most part independent of the mind, language, theory, society, and consciousness, the paradigmatic objects of the humanities are subjects and their integration into their symbolic communities. The humanities do not abstract from the full human perspective, but try to understand it in its social contexts. This means, among other things, that meaning and sensemaking themselves become objects of the humanities so that the idea that objectivity consists in simply mirroring nature or reality as it is, regardless of our intervention, turns out to be insufficient when we take the meaningfulness of human lives into account. We simply cannot study human meaning without engaging in it. Thus, the objects of the humanities are for the most part dependent on the mind, language, theory, society, and human consciousness. This has led to the insight that the nature–culture distinction is flawed – an insight consequential for the topic of an ecological transformation.<sup>24</sup> Even more specifically, the ecological humanities significantly contribute to a novel understanding of the humanities and their positive role for overcoming

various deadlocks of our time (such as apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic thinking).<sup>25</sup>

### Universalism as universalization

While the very idea of universalism, like that of the human being, is all too easily associated with a static and essentialist position, what it aims at expressing is worth defending. Despite justified critiques of false universalisms,<sup>26</sup> whose falsity resides in confusing a local, particular norm of being human with a universal paradigm, universalism as such has not been shown to be a morally untenable position.<sup>27</sup> On the contrary, it is the ground on which legitimate concerns about Eurocentric, anthropocentric, or even racist justifications of colonialism and other forms of morally obnoxious exploitation stand. What moral progress has shown to be wrong and even evil is universally evil, regardless of the historical fact that some groups have been profiting from moral wrongdoing and systemic evil.<sup>28</sup>

In order to emphasize that tenable forms of universalism reject a static model of human nature according to which we would already be equipped with full reflexive self-knowledge and even entitled to automatically impose moral insight on those regarded as morally inferior, one ought to speak of universalizing. That is to say, the 'we' of the ethical community is open-ended and its construction is ongoing. As Xudong Zhang and Zhao Tingyang have pointed out, universalizing as a ground for claiming universality is certainly not limited to the European Enlightenment and, thus, historically not necessarily linked with a repression of otherness.<sup>29</sup>

### Revitalizing hermeneutics

In general, *hermeneutics* is the theory of understanding and self-understanding. It has been developed in the context of the interpretation of texts and other cultural artefacts. In particular, its aim is to address diachronic, historical, but also synchronic cultural and overall mental differences between individuals, collectives, and cultures. Revitalizing hermeneutics today consists in bringing the methods of understanding cultural otherness to bear on the global issues we are facing. In order to see the humanity in each other's person (to borrow one of Kant's formulations of the Categorical Imperative), we have to understand the specific mode of becoming human. Human becoming is a series of self-interpretations. Humans realize the

form of being human in different ways. Revitalized hermeneutics, thus, presuppose the recognition of otherness as a starting point. Its goal is not to overcome otherness, but to see it as a resource in understanding the entanglement of universalism, humanism, and the contextuality of their realization.

From a hermeneutical perspective, the normative and the descriptive are intertwined, because the paradigmatic objects of hermeneutic investigation (holy scriptures, literary texts, artworks, legal texts) contain value representations that cannot be accessed from a value-free perspective (if there is such a thing in the first place).

Modern hermeneutics has been an important driver of different stages of enlightenment. Spinoza's hermeneutical criticism of the Bible forced scholars to pay attention to the different levels of the biblical texts and sub-texts. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur has argued that we can think of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in terms of a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.<sup>30</sup> Their genealogical methods allow us to understand how ideologies turn social into quasi-natural facts. Duncan Kennedy has diagnosed that such a hermeneutics of suspicion is the main mode for critiquing an opponent's legal argument, at least in the US context.<sup>31</sup> In international law, hermeneutics is similarly intertwined with realist critiques that are aimed at discrediting interpretations which do not achieve coherent self-reflexivity.

Revitalizing hermeneutics today means that we commit to the idea that horizons of meaning, sensemaking, and understanding are open and dynamic so that the fusion of horizons is not an exception, but the norm in global contexts where dialogue and mutual recognition of the legitimacy of a multiplicity of perspectives on complex issues are indispensable. This includes taking law, the arts, and religions seriously as media of self-expression that cannot and must not be reduced to the kind of modelling and theory construction constitutive of systems that can largely be explained in causal terms.

The phenomena that build the target system of the humanities are irreducibly qualitative. For this reason, the ethics of hermeneutics has always drawn on the Aristotelian idea of the quality of life as foundational for economics.<sup>32</sup> Revitalizing hermeneutics implies that quantitative methods from economics and other domains of social science which work with data sets as well as models of human thought and behaviour stemming from the natural sciences, ought to be integrated into the horizon of hermeneutics.<sup>33</sup> One hitherto

largely unexplored option for future research and trans-sectoral cooperation would be to focus on qualitative rather than quantitative growth, i.e. to focus on practices of wisdom and humanistic self-knowledge in the actual design of economic indicators and policy-making.

While we endorse the idea of revitalizing hermeneutics, interpretation has its limits. As Gumbrecht and other leading humanists have pointed out, a controlled right to interpretation is embedded in socio-political contexts.<sup>34</sup> Even within the alleged 'ivory tower' of academic radical interpretation, there are rules of ethical discourse, fair allocation of resources, and acceptable limits of research. When put into words, interpretations face the strictures of narrative emplotments. No sphere of human action coordination is so radically autopoeitic as to question absolutely all modes of practical human subjectivity. That also holds true for the interpretation of historical facts which are inevitably produced out of present contexts, desires, and theorizing, but mount stronger resistance to some particular interpretations. 'Objectivity [then] arises from comparing and criticizing rival webs of interpretations in terms of agreed facts' (Bevir 1994: 10).

### Moral realism

One prominent option to thinking of the difference between value and value representation is moral realism, as a possible theory of moral value widely accepted by contemporary ethicists. In general, we can understand moral realism as the view that there are moral facts where a *moral fact* is a true answer to the question of what one ought or ought not do simply in virtue of our shared humanity. Articulation of our shared humanity is, thus, a decisive source of ethical insight. The anthropogenesis of ethical insight does not undermine the claims of animal and environmental ethics, but grounds them in our capacity to track moral facts, a capacity which is more evolved in humans than in any other known species. Moral facts are objective, which should not be understood as implying that they are mind-independent. For they concern us by virtue of being normative. Their normativity cannot be meaningfully reduced to the observable configuration of physical entities or observable human behaviour, as this would undermine their ethical status. Yet the fact that some facts involve human mindedness and social practices of recognition

does not undercut objectivity, as many uncritically assume is shown by the often overhasty rejection of the very idea of ethical objectivity.

Moral realism in that sense (which need not postulate metaphysically suspicious entities beyond the ken of human self-constitution) can be combined with the notion that we can derive ethical claims from the self-investigation of human agency and, therefore, practical subjectivity. As in Scanlon's book, 'what we owe to each other' can be articulated in the form of a theory of goods.<sup>35</sup> In this context, goods can be seen as ways of articulating the good. The good is a deontic necessity, something we ought to do under any circumstances. To the extent that human agency can only be actualized under certain, violable conditions, the good can be seen as a mode of *sustainability*: We ought to preserve the basic conditions of human agency and social action coordination, because it is the source of higher moral insight (ethics) through which the socially structured wellbeing of human and non-human actors (including the ecological niche we share with non-human animals) is promoted.

Ethics as a reflexive discipline is, thus, anthropogenic – elaborated by humans – without thereby being anthropocentric, that is, restricted to human utility. Value theory has long moved beyond the assumption that only humans deserve our care, concern, and attention. Our moral cognitions are not illusions or mere expressions of socially shared preferences, but rather reveal facts about human cooperation and our integration into the wider community of living beings. Thus, moral insight tracks moral facts which are not mysterious entities whose ontological status would be weak compared to measurable, physical quantities. In any event, denying the objectivity of ethical insight and the possibility of moral facts on the ground of a reductionist metaphysics according to which only the physical is real is an untenable stance, as it undermines any sort of value judgement, including judgements concerning value representations, as these cannot be translated into the vernacular of mathematical physics.

A dynamic form of moral realism is a fruitful approach to achieving a balance between universalism and historicity<sup>36</sup> that is at the heart of a New Enlightenment. It implies that there are moral facts concerning obligatory (good), neutral, and evil actions, which moral statements describe and whose existence and nature are partly independent of the beliefs of the people who express them.<sup>37</sup> These

moral facts provide guidelines to know what to do and what to forbid.

To be sure, these partly mind-dependent ethical reference points, which are powerful counterweights to relativism and nihilism, must be contextualized when passing from theory to practice, because conflicts occur when one moves from norm to application. We then face the cases and dilemmas characteristic of our times of uncertainty.<sup>38</sup>

This invites discussion, and in particular trans-cultural exchanges, as many moral facts are not obvious to individuals and collectives. Ethics too deals with uncertainty which arises at the interface of the complex web of normative orders,<sup>39</sup> to which it contributes a decisive level of inquiry.

In addition to the social complexity involved in the heuristics of values and value representation, moral facts are only partly mind-dependent. They involve the human life-form as a paradigmatic starting point that is nevertheless part of a larger natural environment which we share with other living beings. Moral facts are not isolated, purely 'cultural' artefacts; they are inextricably linked with the kinds of facts unearthed by natural science and implemented under economic conditions by technology. For this reason, a New Enlightenment requires large-scale cooperation across disciplines and cultures. The humanities and social sciences provide ethics with a heuristic for value judgement that copes with uncertainty and a full recognition of social complexity without committing the nihilistic or relativistic mistake of denying the existence of moral facts.

### Moral constitutivism

Another prominent strategy to overcome the sharp facts-values separation has been developed by Christine Korsgaard in her version of *moral constitutivism*.<sup>40</sup> Korsgaard's basic idea is that our self-understanding as agents implies inescapable standards. These standards constitute human agency, which is, thus, value-laden as such. The descriptive constitutive elements of our agency contain, as its enabling conditions, at the same time substantive normative implications. Being an agent is, thus, an important source of moral insight. It does not take additional transcendent standards to achieve objectivity. Moral facts can, therefore, be seen as reflections of the constitutive aspects of agency and social cooperation. Moral constitutivists

claim that, since we are not at liberty to select the foundations of our self-understanding as agents, it is also not up to us to accept or reject their implications. Normativity results from this inescapability.

Korsgaard and other moral constitutivists (e.g. David Velleman or Paul Katsafanas) claim that the gap between facts and values can thus persuasively be bridged with reflexive recourse to human agency. Therefore, the humanities are ideally suited to undertaking ethical investigations based on their specific, yet diverse methods and approaches.

A much-discussed argument elaborated by Korsgaard goes roughly as follows: Practical subjectivity relies on strictly binding normative preconditions. Part of these preconditions is that we are obliged to acknowledge certain goods as fundamental in that they turn out to be enabling conditions of our rational agency.

When raising the question of which goods we consider fundamental to our ability to act, we might, taking inspiration from Korsgaard's thought, arrive at the following list:

- *Psycho-physical goods*: these include basic elements of physical and psychic health such as being in (more or less) full possession of bodily faculties and living without permanent pain.
- *Mental goods*: these contain the faculty to use one's cognitive, volitional, imaginative, and emotional abilities, to grasp and follow values, to develop higher-order volitions and principles, and to carry out a life plan.
- *Social goods*: these encompass the goods of participation in social groups, the faculty to join such groups and to benefit from them: i.e. to enter close social relationships with partners, parents, children, relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and so forth.
- *Political goods*: think here of a warranty of basic political rights (human rights, rights of participation, citizenship), the rule of law, benefiting from a positive political development in one's country, and from an open society, its educational system, and promotion prospects.
- *Economic goods*: standards of living and quality of life, including the educational system and the health-care system of a given nation state.

- *Natural and environmental goods*: clean water, air, land, a biodiverse environment, access to healthy food, and the like.
- *Culture-dependent goods*: these are goods that are fundamental for being socially recognized in certain socio-historical contexts (as in the example of leather shoes and a white linen shirt in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*).

These spheres have an objective impact on the good of rational autonomy that an individual can reach. It is possible to combine constitutivism and realism: The enabling conditions of human agency are part of an explanation for why there are moral facts. Thus, it is not our autonomous practical reason that discovers normative orders, but the historically embedded human being whose becoming is the object of humanistic investigation.

This approach to the fact–values dichotomy contains two further elements of interest. The first is that our inner desires and preferences (in general: our pro-attitudes) do not have any normative force unless they are accepted by the agent based on their ‘reflective endorsement’. Thus, our evaluative judgement on actions is not simply an expression of our psychic life but is founded upon second-order reflections or normative self-images. To speak of an action, I must have affirmed and accepted certain ‘pro-attitudes’ to make them work; or, of course, I can reject them as inappropriate. Moreover, whatever motive I decide to follow, the decision must be based on reasons. These reasons guide my practical deliberation, and they must be ‘internal’. In light of these reasons, the motives, impulses, or desires upon which I act must appear to me as justified. The second point is this: a reflective endorsement based on sufficient reasons to act is not suspended by the possible truth of what Korsgaard calls ‘the scientific world-view’ (Korsgaard 1996: 97) and not even by a possible causal determinism of agency. The ‘space of reasons’ in which I participate via my reflective endorsement cannot meaningfully be reduced to causes in the scientific sense. Here a facts–values distinction makes good sense: scientific facts (be they as real as it gets) do not imply a normative force.

Moreover, the practice of reflective endorsement cannot be adequately spelled out as a series of convenient, on-the-spot judge-

ments. It must be formulated as a rule valid for all cases whose relevant features are similar. It is based on a practical identity harkening back to the agent's biographical background and socio-historical context: during the process of assessment and reflective endorsement, the agent is asked to replace given conditions with a consciously chosen normative self-image. My normative self-image then constitutes an obligation to act whenever my self-image would be damaged by inactivity or by acting differently. My chosen self-image is to be criticized in light of a dynamic concept of the broadest possible community of human becoming, humanity.

### Phenomenology

A phenomenological approach can complement this perspective by starting with the suspension of our beliefs (*epoché*) and returning to the acts of consciousness which enable us to assess the meaning of things and of our relationships to them. Applied to our practices, this leads us to make an inventory: We can understand which practices deserve to be kept because they respect the meaning of the activities described and define which we must change or even suppress. This inventory, which has to be made at both the individual and collective level, is key to a process of emancipation involving both the liberation from counterproductive patterns and habits and the reorientation of our practices, i. e. taking back control over our lives, by saying what kind of world we want to live in and what we want to prevent.<sup>41</sup>

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a crucial part of humanistic methodology. Indeed it allows one to identify structures of existence that follow from the description of the human being understood as a historical being, endowed with freedom, and considered in their corporality as a vulnerable being who ages, dies, and needs others' care, and who 'lives from' natural and cultural things, or is dependent on nature and other living beings. Such a phenomenological anthropology that articulates the earthly, carnal, and relational dimension of the subject asks us to make the protection of the biosphere and justice towards other living beings and future generations novel duties of the state. The latter are added to the duties classically devolved to the political, namely our security and the reduction of unfair inequalities.<sup>42</sup>

Because phenomenology tries to get to the interaction between being, human and non-human, and the world which they each

shape in their own way, it allows us to reveal several layers of lived experience. Given that human experience of social and natural reality is profoundly value-laden, the phenomenological, reflective understanding of the human life-world is an important methodological tool for the heuristics of ethics and other normative domains.

Underlining the heterogeneity of access to the world helps us understand that other animals shape the world in a different way to us and are other existences, as Merleau-Ponty describes it. There is one world, one planet, and a diversity of ways of configuring it. This 'lateral universalism' of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is the promise of a non-hegemonic rationalism.<sup>43</sup> The latter is not only welcoming of diversity, but shows that it is essential, since no one can have direct access to its totality; the process of discovering the world is open-ended.<sup>44</sup>

### Narratives and values

After the tragedies of the 20th century, reason itself has come under attack: It can serve both good and evil, support any end, insofar as, having been reduced to its sole dimension of functionality and having been transformed into a force of calculation, it cannot by itself serve to distinguish good from evil, the just from the unjust.<sup>45</sup> The fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the communist ideal that gave people a horizon transcending their individual lives, have even banned political utopias from Western politics.<sup>46</sup> Instead, negative, dystopian, and apocalyptic modes of representing the future of humanity have conquered our social imagination, which is precisely part of our current situation vis-à-vis the nested crises we are in.

Postmodern discourse in the last quarter of the 20th century led the humanities to reject the idea of grand narratives. In the name of various dimensions of diversity, as we would nowadays call it, the humanities started to shy away from large-scale attempts to understand or even to shape social systems by providing positive narratives. Postmodern thinkers remained stuck in critical positions and thereby had too little to offer to counter the rapid rise of economism and promote a development model that is ecologically sustainable and more just.<sup>47</sup> Repudiating grand narratives as 'metaphysical' does not calm down the human desire to live a meaningful life. For this reason, other disciplines and actors have filled the gap left by the

humanities and started constructing precisely the kind of grand narratives that postmodern thinkers deemed superfluous or even dangerous in view of the 'end of history', as Fukuyama (1989) puts it. Neoliberalism has been the most successful grand narrative to fill the gap: The idea that we need no narratives in order to globalize markets has itself become a grand narrative that is too often uncritically accepted as political dogma.

By now, it has become evident that the declaration of 'the end of history' and the end of large-scale narratives was premature. This explains the societal need for narratives and value-judgements that can contribute to positive social change. There have always been notable exceptions within the humanities and social sciences that have stayed closer to the demands of society. That has been the case for fragmented fields of applied ethics and for particular normative disciplines which have played a role in policy-advising, such as law or economics. There are signs that the situation is changing more generally. The digital revolution and developments in artificial intelligence have exposed the need for normative guidance and, in many research projects, put closer cooperation between researchers from a wide variety of backgrounds into practice. This is even more evident in the case of the ecological crisis, which stands at the centre of attention, and is a major source of the sense of urgency that characterizes our era of nested crises.

Whereas traditional wisdom was based on a cosmology allowing each one to know his place and to accept beliefs concerning what the good is, secular politics spread the belief that today we are ultimately 'alone, without excuses', as Sartre (2007: 29) put it in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Indeed, today we have no excuses, because our demographic weight, ecological footprint, and technological prowess make our human responsibility hyperbolic. At the same time, as many moral philosophers have argued, secular ethics is a rather young field of inquiry, as ethics has long been driven by various theological belief systems which are not universally shareable.<sup>48</sup> Secular ethics, as part of the humanities and social sciences, does not exclude religious spheres of normativity from consideration, as theology and religious studies (among other disciplines) explicitly deal with religious values and value representations, which are integrated into ethical value judgements without reducing them to any kind of divine revelation.<sup>49</sup>

Human decision-making is always driven by narratives. Humans project themselves into the future which is part of the very structure of human action. In this way, humans produce individual and collective narratives through which they make their historically and socially situated perspectives explicit and communicable. Confusing levels of normativity easily create false and socially harmful narratives. In a context of social complexity and thus of uncertainty, there is a strong temptation to cling to simplifying narratives – that is, to produce ideologies. The critical examination of given narratives is already a potential contribution to positive social change.

Humanistic recognition of a culture of genuine social complexity does not hinder action but can be factored into a non-reductive understanding of the human condition which we urgently need in order to tackle the global and therefore essentially multicultural conditions of production and reproduction of goods, services, thoughts, and experiences. New global solutions to the challenges ahead of us require overcoming the very idea of a centre of overall societal activity while bringing goals into focus.

Explanation of the characteristics of human action presupposes that we make recourse to narratives. On the individual level, humans think of their lives in light of their biographies to which they contribute by making choices. On the collective level, social identities are handed down as narratives from generation to generation by way of social imaginaries, cultural memories, mythologies, rituals, and so forth whose function is to provide overall normative guidelines. Narratives constitute dynamic identities thanks to which we anticipate the future as well as identify courses of action and existential possibilities open to us in the present.<sup>50</sup>

It is time to promote a self-conception of the humanities which allows them both to critically scrutinize various existing and competing large-scale narratives and to create new horizons of sense-making and meaning. Thinking about false narratives concerning socially important matters (such as social injustices of all sorts) can never occur in a value-free space.

Given the prominent role that the very idea of a narrative plays in contemporary socio-economic and political discourse formation, it is striking that its use is not yet tied to layers of normativity. Narratives can be better or worse, more or less useful; they can be judged by comparing them to the facts, thereby assessing the truth-value of

some of their claims and how the claims add up to a plot-like, narrative structure of sensemaking.

We propose to think of the humanities as conceptual tools capable of sharpening the vague political notion of a narrative by providing multi-level conceptual and participatory tools in order to reconcile theory and practice. This implies that we ought to avoid a top-down approach according to which academic knowledge simply has to be transferred to other sectors of society. Rather, the methods, tools, and results that are developed in the humanities and social sciences have to be translated into different contexts, which requires substantial trans-sectoral cooperation that transcends 'business as usual':

1. On the *individual* level, narrative matters insofar as the narrative account of personal identity and subjectivity rightly represents a crucial dimension of agency. Humans lead a life in light of a conception of where they come from, who they are, and who they want to be. In this context, they tell stories that confer meaning on more specific actions, stories which provide a horizon of meaning. The humanities and social sciences (from literary and art criticism to political theory, from philosophy to sociology, from law to history, from sinology to media studies, and so on) in their broadest possible range of disciplines and activities provide understanding and explanation for how narratives are constructed on an individual level and how we ought to provide standards for assessing and evaluating them.

These standards are not external to the subject matter of the humanities. Rather, the idea of a life led in light of the stories one tells about oneself is, as such, imbued with value; it offers its own normative self-conception. Yet narratives can succeed and fail in manifold ways. They can be manipulated, result from ideology and propaganda;<sup>51</sup> they can offer path-breaking and life-changing modes of solving problems, liberate an agent from fear, and significantly contribute to overcoming crises on an individual level (as is well known from the narratological architecture of psychoanalysis and other forms of psychological treatment).

2. On a *collective, social* level, narratives enter the picture in that groups organize themselves in light of fictional accounts of their being. To be social is to be integrated into storytelling, collective imagination, and acts of shared transcendence: The immediately given social setting is always transcended by any given group with respect to a shared (sometimes conflictual, sometimes positively coordinated) understanding of the focus of meaningful activity.<sup>52</sup>

Regimes and institutions are eminent examples of such collectives. In the field of social and political sciences, thinking of nations as ‘imagined communities’, according to Anderson (2016), goes in a similar direction, and a constitution’s preamble can be read as an expression of related stories about collective pasts and futures. Many transnational communities can be thought of as regimes, unified and distinguished by the legitimating narrative that is embedded in community practices.

3. In the ordering adopted here for the sake of exposition, the highest level of social identity formation is *humanity*. Humans can be regarded as the kinds of animals that constitutively lead a life in light of varying self-portraits. While individuals and collectives can differ in terms of their specific value representations, narratives, and goals (which is the basis of liberal pluralism as an indispensable parameter for all value formation), there is an overarching capacity, namely the capacity to specify one’s individual or collective assumptions concerning the meaning of (human) life itself. Humans have a trans-cultural understanding of their capacity to be individuals. Gabriel has called this ‘higher-order anthropology’ (Gabriel 2021: 65): All lower-level self-conceptions (such as the *homo oeconomicus*, *homo metaphysicus*, *homo ludens*, *pictor*, etc.) are grounded in the universal capacity to specify a human self-portrait.

For our purposes, ‘a narrative can be considered as a discursive form that opens semantic space for the integration and arrangement of a multiplicity of representations’ (Gumbrecht 2004b: 23). At this point,

though, a well-known pitfall must be avoided. Engaging in the active humanist ‘production of complexity’ by considering multiple perspectives on processes of micro-, meso-, and macro-level social and ecological transformation should not mislead one into losing sight of the kinds of facts that are not open to change by interpretation. It would be a mistake to identify nature with this category of facts. Social and historical facts can be as ‘unamendable’<sup>53</sup> and solid as geological facts, which is part and parcel of any explanation of the force of normativity. Normativity, and thus the source of values, is inextricably bound up with facts of human and non-human nature as well as with genealogical facts about the pasts, presents, and futures of social spheres.

### Law and legal critique

Law, like art, plays a central role in society, enabling and constraining governance and everyday interaction. It shapes societies in their self-understandings through constitutions, the proclamation of values, public debate, and many transversal concepts such as those of sovereignty, the separation of powers, or citizenship. It is difficult to understand European society, for instance, were it not through the integrative capacity of law.<sup>54</sup> The law interacts with communities’ broader processes of sensemaking, shaping society, and being shaped by it in the production of legal meaning. Law, Robert Cover averred with lasting impact, is ‘not only a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live’ (Cover 1983: 4–5).

Liberal democracies set up the law as a means for the individual and collective self-determination of realizing private and public autonomy, notably through contract and legislation. It would be a mistake to consider any law as static once written down, embedded with a meaning that could be revealed at any time. An understanding of law in analogy to the open-textured work of art, and of legal judgement in conversation with aesthetics, fares much better. Law provides the ground for struggles over its meaning in which subjective judgements compete for objectivity. In the operative legal discourse, the rules and canons of interpretation structure the justification for any judgement in distinct ways, and in an institutionalized system legal controversies can often be resolved through authoritative de-

cisions in court. But, for one thing, no interpretation or court judgment is entirely determined by the law and, for another, any court decision is again open to interpretation in a way that finds no end.

Under these conditions, legal critique can take many different forms.<sup>55</sup> Some interpretations of the law are still better than others *in terms of the law*. The open process of legal discourse cultivates a non-reducible layer of legal normativity. At the same time, presumptions of law's legitimacy can and should of course be critiqued and rebutted, in light of practical morality, in the spirit of a hermeneutics of suspicion, as ideology, or otherwise. The fact that the law is so closely tied to the workings of power just as well as to aspirations towards justice contributes to its central role in society. As such, the law shows traces of the best and the worst, taking stock of patterns of domination and struggles for emancipation at national, subnational and international levels of governance. Any critique raises questions about the standpoint of the critic, their situatedness and aspiration to objectivity. But neither the critic of law nor of art is alone in this, and the fact that every starting point of critique is partial does not mean that critique needs to end up there.<sup>56</sup>

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## 4 The humanities and social sciences will only succeed if they pursue an integrative approach

Internal disciplinary dynamics and the organization of research have created obstacles for integrated approaches. Developments in research have paralleled the functional differentiation of society, leading to greater specialization and remarkable expertise. But they have come with the downsides of silos: deep but narrow views of the social world. Disciplinary identities and professional belonging have been constructed in negative opposition to respective others. The development of mainstream, allegedly value-free economics is only the most egregious example with its feeble attempt to rid itself of normative foundations.