
1 The need to recouple the humanities and social sciences with society

Humanity is facing a complex meshwork of nested crises: the ecological crisis, various economic crises (from financial crises to growing inequalities), the geopolitical crisis, the energy crisis, the soon to be massive migration crisis fuelled by geopolitical catastrophes, the crisis of healthcare, and the still ongoing coronavirus crisis. These crises are systemic, global, and experienced by different human and non-human actors in a variety of ways. They confront us with environmental, economic, health, social, and political risks, which raise profound questions about the currently dominant models that define what is perceived as successful and normatively desirable development.

A crisis does not just mean that something is wrong or that there is a general problem or even a very big problem. A crisis, from the Greek *krisis*, means a decision; a crisis is a turning point that requires an intervention in order to avoid *catastrophe*. A crisis is, thus, a normatively laden turning point. Its outcome depends on human decision-making in conditions of social and natural complexity. For this reason, we can only meaningfully deal with a crisis by endorsing a set of normative principles from different domains in order to prevent catastrophe by taking the right decisions.

However, the current crises are all interwoven and they are associated with different kinds of normativity: military and ethical, ecological and economic, legal and aesthetic, cultural and universal, local and global, individual and collective norms are at play both in describing and in solving the problems that first lead to crisis and, if unresolved, transform into catastrophe.

One important driver of the dynamics of the nested crises noted above is the *decoupling* of natural-scientific, technological, and economic development from broader questions of human value, the good life, and wellbeing.¹ A few examples may suffice to illustrate this point:

- The immense power of modern information and communication technology (most recently: artificial intelligence) in large-scale social systems is restructuring human interaction in hitherto unknown ways. Purely technological perspectives cannot answer the question of the purposes to which technology should be put, and who is entitled to make such decisions.² The risk is that human value, collective decision-making, and wellbeing will be left behind. For this reason, governments rightly call for the regulation of socially disruptive information and communications technology in legal and ethical terms, which is why the recent discipline of the ‘ethics of AI’ has gained much attention. Its function is to re-couple socially disruptive technology with research into legal and ethical values and value representations in order to provide guidelines for how to reshape the relevant technology in light of human needs, rights, and duties.
- The digital transformation called for by many governments as part of the solution to the ecological crisis in turn creates novel issues of sustainability as a result of the material resources needed to produce and maintain the material dimensions of apparently purely symbolic data. The humanities are ideally suited to critically investigate this ideological layer and the illusions generated in a context of rapid social transformation. Recoupling in this context means integrating humanistic and social-scientific qualitative studies into the discourse of digital transformation with the aim of distinguishing between desirable and undesirable cases of automation of labour and replacement of human interaction and practices by digital systems.
- Food production and consumption are driven by unsustainable desires, expectations, and mindsets. Inappropriate mindsets hamper the ability to tackle the complex relationship between humans, non-human animals, and our shared habitat so that a systemic change on the level of mindsets and their material conditions is necessary. The humanities deal with our view of ourselves as

human beings. Insofar as human beings do what they do in light of broad conceptions of how they fit into nature, how they share features with non-human animals while still being profoundly different from them, humanistic research into such conceptions and mindsets is a precondition for meaningful, systemic change of our value representations.

- Standard economic models that still focus predominantly on quantitative growth are too narrow to measure human wellbeing. This leads to a conception of the socio-economic sphere in ways largely blind to the models designed to explain and overcome shortcomings in the actual target system of economic models, i.e. our economies. The very discipline in the business of producing economic solutions creates new problems when it does not take value-laden human experience into account in its efforts to measure economic success. Unrealistic conceptions of us as human beings, of our preferences, utilities, mindsets, desires, and modes of thinking and cooperating affect concrete policy proposals which then interfere with society as the broadest domain of socio-economic interaction. Socio-economic interactions qua target-systems of economics contain values and value representations in the form of the arts, religion, vast cultural differences, local and global histories, as well as threats, hopes, and interests on individual and collective levels that have to be integrated into economic theory. The humanities, therefore, can and ought to contribute to a paradigm change in economic thinking which takes into account the concepts of the quality of life, the first-person perspective of human agents and their integration into larger natural and social processes.

A false self-conception has negative consequences for how we act. Thus, the positive contribution of humanistic self-investigation into how we conceive of ourselves at various levels of individual action and social interaction consists in correcting false consciousness. This requires transdisciplinary cooperation, i.e. academic research

across disciplinary boundaries that takes place in a context of socio-economic interaction with stakeholders and practitioners from all relevant fields.

Reorienting the humanities and social sciences

The globally interconnected, nested crises – produced and experienced differentially across nations, geographies, and sectors – call for a shift in the value structures and value representations that are among the sources of these crises. To the extent that humans act in light of a conception of themselves, they produce value representations. For humans lead a life on the basis of what they deem valuable. These value representations are not natural givens, as written in our DNA, but products of histories. The humanities study value representations and are able to discuss them in light of normative principles generated in ethics, economics, theology, and the law, to name but a few examples.

Value representations, thus, can be evaluated in light of actual values, be they constructed or produced by human action (as value constructivists assume) or detected due to a special human capacity for making sense of our value-laden experience of the life-world (as some value phenomenologists and moral realists argue).

The values that tacitly underpin ecologically unsustainable, and socially unjust economic as well as political practices and decision-making need to be brought to light, interrogated, and changed. If the transition to a more sustainable lifeworld takes place without integrating value structures and representations into its ethos, the decoupling problems which landed us in the modern predicament are likely to tighten.

The massive shifts human beings are beginning to experience as a species in the face of climate change raise new questions of how to value natural goods, environments, and animals, as well as the status of our ethical obligations to one another as denizens of a planet with limited natural resources. How to determine and distribute responsibility for the production and solution of problems depends, among other things, on social and historical parameters grounded in different conceptions of the human condition and its integration into the cosmos. This means that future-oriented research from the humanities can and ought to be integrated into other knowledge and practice fields which already deal with how to tackle systemic crises,

often neglecting humanistic insights due to the institutional decoupling we describe above.

The inevitable socio-ecological transformation underway is, thus, in urgent need of a humanistic and social underpinning. In this regard, we call for a future- and goal-directed positioning of research to develop conceptual tools that can contribute to a new 'Vision of the Good' (Leiter 2013: 121).

Today this goes beyond a culture of individual practical wisdom. For what is at stake in complex crises is *social* and not merely *individual* freedom. Social freedom concerns the shape of meaningful activities which only make sense against a background of shared understanding. Where social freedom is concerned, community and the individual reciprocally determine one another. Individual self-determination has to be reconfigured in light of collective responsibility. For this reason, we ought to reconcile the moral demands on individual action with the collective architecture of the very problem space within which our individual choices make sense. Both have to be taken into account, which requires a new form of intellectual cooperation across the humanities and social sciences as well as feedback loops to and from non-academic actors. Interdisciplinary exchange is not enough; we need trans-sectoral cooperation and integration in order to shift our mindsets and structure social change in light of our 'best account' (Rosa 2021: 151) of what it means to be human in the 21st century.³

2 The unique knowledge position of the humanities and social sciences

Human beings are 'self-interpreting animals' (Taylor 1985: 45–76). This implies: How we make sense of ourselves shapes who we are and who we become. There is no single substantial nature to the human in light of which we can identify stable sets of preferences or patterns of societal wellbeing. Human beings have the higher-order ability to select rules, maxims, guiding principles, and normative