Bridging Divides? Sounding a Limit

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My third submission 'Bridging Models of Inquiry: The Scholastic and the Reflexive' went with a certain optimism about 'bridging the rift' between inquiries (whether humanistic or otherwise). I now want to sound a limit to 'bridging', in the process reconstituting the very grounds of inquiry - especially as it relates to problems which necessitate taking the human agent into account - as well as repositioning the specificity of the human sciences. Needless to say, I approach this undertaking with some tentativeness, but paradoxically enough I hope to cover some further ground in pushing the frontiers of 'disciplinarity'.

1. Two pointers

While it would appear possible to discuss the 'human' sciences without reference to the 'natural' sciences (as well as the converse) – surely the idea of 'rethinking interdisciplinarity' entails something more than just a set of identifiable competencies being brought to bear on a specific object – two points mitigate against the notion that the domain of the sciences (whether humanistic of otherwise) could be devoid of relationality.

First, increasingly in recent times, topics or issues considered to be of interest to the human sciences (such a morality, politics, memory, the nature of rationality, aesthetics and value, the domain of desires, emotions and affects, and so on) have come to engage a whole new array of scientific disciplines (as constituted by the cognitive and neurosciences, primatology, evolutionary biology, genetic sciences and biomedicine, computer science, and even behavioural economics). The domain of the sciences as a whole has tended to converge, which has meant that they have to be rearticulated through a more active consideration of the creaturely and relational element that the disciplines as compounded elements both now presuppose and imply.

Second, inasmuch as the sciences have tended to converge, new lines may yet have to be drawn in reconstituting the grounds of both scientific research and interdisciplinarity. Readers may be interested to note that in a brief commentary on aspects of Charles Taylor's presentation of the 'difference' between the natural and human sciences [see, especially, Taylor (1985); Hacking (1986) is also relevant along this axis] – the philosopher-historian of science, Thomas Kuhn had maintained (against Taylor's way of presenting the matter) that "no more in the natural than in the human sciences is there some neutral, culture-independent set of categories within which the populations – whether of objects or of actions – can be described" (Kuhn 1998: 131). More pointedly, Kuhn insisted that "the natural sciences, … though they may require what I have called a hermeneutic base, are not themselves hermeneutic enterprises" (ibid.: 133); indeed that while the human sciences are hermeneutic enterprises, one may still ask whether they are restricted to the hermeneutic, to interpretation. For Kuhn, clearly, it is not a question of whether the social and the natural sciences are of the same kind; rather, "*how the line between the two enterprises might be drawn*" (ibid.: 129, emphasis added). [Cf. also the allusion to Bent Flyvbjerg in my third submission, who as we saw therein is concerned primarily to foreground the reflexive model, investing it with stakes that impinge on constituting social scientific inquiry as a domain distinct from the natural sciences. He seems oblivious to the question that Kuhn is drawing attention; although, it must be conceded, that his (Flyvbjerg) reference to the 'problem of self-interpretive objects of study' (Flyvbjerg 2001 and 2005/06) introduces other substantive complications not all of which are recuperable within the domain of the natural sciences howsoever redrawn and

revitalized. This latter point goes for Charles Taylor's idea of the human sciences as concerned with 'self-interpreting animals' as well (see Taylor 1985).]

2. Redrawing the line

Even as I had taken, in my third submission, the 'two cultures' debate fostered by C.P. Snow as my point of departure, I had sought to reconstitute the same as also naming a phenomenon that has to do with contradictory dispositions *internal* to the practice of inquiry (whether humanistic or otherwise). I had maintained that while science and humanistic study (literature, in particular) may have figured as the terms of the controversy in the 'two cultures' debate, they did not represent its final stakes; indeed, that the stakes in the 'two cultures' division have had to do ultimately with the design of inquiries both within and across disciplinary domains. For the purposes of my reflection therein, I had isolated two dispositions (namely, the 'scholastic' and the 'reflexive' – as central to the design of inquiries (whether humanistic or otherwise), while going on to mediate between these two dispositions in an effort to bridge divides within and across disciplines.

I now want to push the stakes of the 'two cultures' idea further – perhaps even reinforcing it – without necessarily positing the 'limit' that I will be sounding to bridging as a 'difference' of object and method between the natural and social sciences. My point is that a further stake in the 'two cultures' division has to with the status of '*normative*' considerations – considerations that invoke some sort of 'ought' claim – specifically, but by no means exclusively, claims about 'what ought to be believed?' and 'what ought to be done?'. In looking further into the very status of *normative* considerations as thus rendered, one could get a sharper measure of the line to be drawn between the natural and human sciences. [I had stated at the very outset that I approach this undertaking with some tentativeness, and this has to do precisely with this question of the normative. There is no agreement among philosophers about what makes judgments moral – as indeed about what makes moral judgments distinctively normative. Likewise, there is no common ground about what the relevant contrast is supposed to be between the normative and the non-normative – although, as part of one's initiation into sociology/social science, one had learnt that the relevant contrast is between descriptive judgments/statements and prescriptive judgments/statements but paradoxically enough I hope to cover some further ground in pushing the frontiers of 'disciplinarity'. The question of the normative, as indeed the challenge of explicating normativity across domains of practice, looms large in my current research.]

Admittedly, the two 'ought' claims that we have foregrounded – namely, 'what ought to be believed?' and 'what ought to be done?' – can be seen to be at the heart of the human sciences, geared towards increasing the possibilities of, and deepening the contexts for, judgment. While these normative considerations seem like distinctly philosophical questions, it must be reiterated that they are not confined to the philosophical. They also carry a distinctive political edge, whether oriented towards retaining a certain state of affairs or imploring its transformation. The questions can emerge everywhere in the context of our reflexive and scholastic pursuits about what there is and how something can be known. The 'ought' claims as rendered here can involve interdisciplinary styles of thinking between and across the human sciences (and can even implicate a new line of thinking within the latter as well).

All the same, my aim here is to explore further the possibilities for renewing our idea and understanding of the human sciences, possibilities which are implied in these and such other normative considerations. Of course, this is easier said than done, especially since there is great distrust about there being a singular source of truth and value or about their being any one way to address and engage normative issues and accompanying 'ought' claims at a *first-order* level. Besides, there is the further suspicion that first-order normative claims have been so various and have changed so often that we have a better chance of explaining why people have come to have

various views about what ought to be believed or ought to be done rather than we have of assessing the 'quality' of their answers. In fact, the idea that there *are* truth claims about normative matters that ought to be pursued, discussed or assessed as such (rather than as historically contextualised 'truths', or bits of evidence, about what people believed at a specific time and place) is approached as an outmoded and insipid humanism (see Culler 2005; also Gumbrecht 2005 and Harpham 2005). In other words: if there is in the human sciences today no way to resolve *first-order* questions of normative truth and value, then that is all one would think there is to the enterprise of reflection and inquiry, namely, the scholastic study of why people have come to believe what they do or come to do what they do at a particular time and place. Indeed, on our terms as reconstructed in our third submission, this is clearly another case of the reflexive disposition yielding to or making way for the scholastic orientation internal to academic disciplines (humanistic and otherwise). But there is more to this intertwining, as we shall presently see.

3. The 'practical autonomy' of the normative

One can certainly claim that this scepticism about the independent or autonomous status of the normative is something like a necessary condition for the scholastic and reflexive study of why people have come to believe what they generally do (or did at a particular time and place). But if it is 'truth-claims' that are primarily at issue within the human sciences, then it may be equally meaningful to consider what happens when such explanatory considerations are understood to have interchanged with what we are calling *first-order* normative questions (as distinct from the sideways on scholastic questions about what *explains* why people do this or that, believe this or that).

The argument is basically that the two sorts of questions as a possible ground of the human sciences per se – namely, the *first-order* normative questions about what ought to be believed and/or done and the sideways on scholastic view about what explains why people do this or that, believe this or that – are logically distinct and irreducibly different. Normative questions, as first-order questions, are practically unavoidable in a 'first-personal' context, and necessarily linked to the human practice of giving and demanding reasons for what we do, especially when everything that we do affects, changes, or limits what another would have been able to do (in short, a context of relationality). One is never a mere bystander in a scheme of things; one has to necessarily steer. [My rumination here, suitably condensed, bears on the question of value and agency; it also inflects, if you will, the space of (Kantian) autonomy, both as a matter of fact and as a suggestion of right. Again, this represents an order of work that I need to establish more fully and comprehensively. I also share in the growing sentiment that such axiological claims (as the one that I have just foregrounded) should be construed naturalistically (and thus as empirical claims)]. We are certainly not denying that a certain sociological and/or psychological condition is underwriting our attitudes and dispositions as human actors in a bounded scheme of things. Rather, the point is that no such discovery (or postulation) can of itself count as a reason to do or forbear from doing anything; indeed that the autonomy, or possible self-rule, at issue in these discussions is not a metaphysical one, but involves (shall we say) the 'practical autonomy of the normative'.

What this must entail for our redrawing of the priorities of the human sciences is that, even as the scholastic and reflexive dispositions are bound together, they cannot eliminate the agent's perspective whenever he or she has to decide what to believe or do. The fact that people are often self-deceived, or even grossly ignorant, of why they do what they do (even devising 'reasons' for their actions *ex post-facto*) cannot discount the practical autonomy of the normative. Surely the fact that people often act without being able to explain or justify why they do what they do cannot be a reason to act in any which way; the essence of being human being the ability to steer. Perhaps one can end with a thought structuring the work of Wittgenstein. "Working in

philosophy", he tells us in the writings put together as *Culture and Value*, "… is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them)" [Wittgenstein 1984: no pagination]. Surely there is more to the human sciences than the specification of the 'conditions of existence' of objects.

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