

Normativity I – The Dialectical Legacy

D F M Strauss

Dean's Office
Faculty of the Humanities
University of the Free State
P.O. Box 339
Bloemfontein 9300
South Africa
dfms@cknet.co.za

Abstract:

With Habermas it is important to realize that one has to differentiate between moral and non-moral (a-moral) norms, which is different from what is immoral. However, since the Renaissance reflections on human freedom were caught up in the dialectic of necessity (nature) and freedom. A brief sketch is given of the development of this dialectic within modern philosophy – as it was manifested in the thought of Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Comte, Marxism, the Baden school of neo-Kantianism (Windelband, Rickert, Weber) and existentialism (Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty). The influence of the neo-Kantian opposition of facts and values within social thought is briefly highlighted, followed by a brief characterization of the normative inclination of human beings. Then some of the problems entailed in the modern concept of freedom are analyzed in relation to the idea of *autonomy*. This idea is burdened by the problem that the *conditions for being human* have to coincide with what meets these conditions, namely the human being. In addition it is difficult to derive *collective norms* from the autonomy of a *single individual*. The alternative avenue suggested by the idea of *ontic normativity* will be investigated in a separate article, exploring the way towards a more integral understanding of normativity.

1. Preliminary distinctions

Norms or principles are supposed to guide human conduct and therefore they immediately call forth the idea of norm-conformity and antinormativity (*obedience* and *disobedience*). This distinction, in turn, presupposes the (human) capacity to *identify* and *distinguish* the possible avenues of action and to freely choose between the available options. There are not many choices at any specific moment – just one choice amongst multiple options. Therefore a *freedom of choice* presupposes an *accountable agent* to which the choice made and its consequences can be *attributed*.

Traditionally the awareness of what *ought to be* done was placed within the category of the *ethos* of life (the *ethical*), also designated as the domain of *morality* or what is considered to be *moral*. Sometimes ethics and morality are distinguished in the sense that the former designates the *academic discipline* reflecting upon what is moral, the “ought (to be).” Prominent thinkers, however, exceeded this limitation. Habermas, for instance, speaks of “ethical” and “moral” aspects [“ethischen und moralischen Aspek-

ten” – Habermas, 1998:202], of the *juridical aspect* (Habermas, 1998:207) and of the fact that the “ought” remains non-specific as long as the relevant problem is not determined and the *aspect* within which it must be solved has not been identified (Habermas, 1998:197). This suggests that we have to distinguish between *moral* normativity and *a-moral* or *non-moral* normativity – which of course is different from the *immoral*.

To summarize: The freedom of choice we have to act in norm-conforming or norm-violating ways also calls forth (and presupposes) the *responsibility* and *accountability* which we have to assume for those consequences attributed to our actions.

Acknowledging that the domain of normativity encompasses more than *moral* normativity liberates us from a “basket” understanding of normativity according to which all instances of norm-guided behavior must be located within the category of the “ethical” or “morality.” This legacy denies other normative aspects their proper right of existence. Distinguishing what is logically sound from what is illogical, for example, presupposes the existence of logical norms or principles and the latter do not coincide with *ethical normativity*. Similarly, avoiding excesses and acting in frugal ways exemplifies the normativity underlying the distinction between proper and improper economic activities and also this normative domain does not coincide with the moral.

Whereas these initial remarks are guided by an understanding of normativity within the context of norms or principles and human actions subjected to them, modern philosophy actually opted for a dialectical understanding of freedom and normativity, one in which freedom and causal determination are juxtaposed. We now proceed with the main focus of this article, a *brief* analysis of the development of the *dialectic* between necessity (causality) and freedom (the sphere of the *ought*, eventually also seen as the domain of *values*) within modern philosophy. Probing a way towards a more integral understanding will be pursued in the above-mentioned follow-up article.

2. Contours of the dialectic of necessity and freedom in modern philosophy

Particularly since the Renaissance the course of the development of modern philosophy reveals a fundamental tension between the universal scope of deterministic natural (= mechanical-physical) laws on the one hand and the ideal of human autonomy and freedom on the other. The ideal of an “exact” science, exemplified in mathematics and physics, embodied the conviction that the entire universe may be understood by unveiling the fundamental “laws of nature” governing it. However, within such a deterministic universe human freedom cannot be safe-guarded, for the human person is then also reduced to a cause amongst causes and an effect amongst effects, fully determined without any freedom. Husserl characterized this legacy as the “rationalistic science ideal” (Husserl 1954:64 ff.119).¹

¹ In a different context Husserl rejects what he designates as the *naturalistic prejudice*. “The naturalistic prejudice must be given up. Solely from this prejudice emerges the determinism that mechanizes the natural world into an on-going machine that in principle is incomprehensible and meaningless. This prejudice at once also blindfolds the naturalist by preventing the recognition of the peculiar achievement of the totality of historical and generalizing sciences focused on personal spirituality and culture.” “Das naturalistische Vorurteil muß fallen. Nur aus diesem Vorurteil entspringt jener die natürliche Welt

Dooyeweerd develops an extensive analysis of modern philosophy in which he points out that the science ideal is merely an *instrument* in the hands of the early modern ideal of *autonomous freedom*, the *personality ideal* (see Dooyeweerd 1997-I:215-495).²

Since Descartes, the ideal of such an encompassing natural scientific *control* of all of reality therefore started to dominate the scene. In order to proclaim its autonomy (being a law unto itself) and its freedom, the human being had to master reality with the aid of the newly developing natural sciences. In his discussion of the thought of Descartes, the well-known, philosophically informed physicist, Von Weizsäcker, reveals a penetrating understanding of this orientation: “This state of affairs is characteristic of modernity. It is not the world in which I find myself that guarantees my existence. This guarantee is not lost, for when I recover the world then it is as the object of my self-assured thinking, that is to say, as an object which I can manipulate.”³

In the thought of Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Berkeley and Hume primacy was given to the modern science ideal, although they explored alternative modes of explanation in their choices of a basic denominator under which their determinism subsumed all of reality. Hobbes opted for *movement* – he aimed at reconstructing reality in terms of the concept *moving body* (because he was already familiar with Galileo’s mechanics). Leibniz advanced the idea of discrete monads subjected to his *law of continuity* (*lex continui* – see Leibniz 1976:397), while Berkeley and Hume switched to *perception* as principle of explanation.⁴

It was Rousseau who brought modern thought back to the primacy of freedom in its dialectical starting-point, manifest in its basic motive of nature (science ideal) and freedom (personality ideal). The shift away from the deterministic science ideal is clearly seen in his remark: “Nature commands every animal, and the brute obeys. The human being experiences the same impulse, but recognizes the freedom to acquiesce or to resist; and particularly in the awareness of this freedom the spirituality of humankind manifests itself. ... but in the capacity to will, or much rather to choose, and the experience of this power, one encounters nothing but purely spiritual acts which are totally inexplicable through mechanical laws” (Rousseau 1975:47).

Kant continued this restoration of the primacy of the personality ideal. He did that by restricting the natural science ideal to the domain of *sensory perception* in order to open up space for the assumed *moral autonomy* of the human person (the personality ideal of the human person as an *aim in itself: Selbstzweck*). The analytical tool employed in this development is found in the distinction between *essence* and *appearance*, a distinction derived from the Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of *substance*. The

mechanisierende Determinismus, der die Welt zu einer prinzipiell unverständlichen und sinnlos dahinfliehenden Maschine macht. Ein Vorurteil, das den Naturalisten zugleich blind macht für die eigentümliche Leistung der gesamten historischen und der generalisierenden Wissenschaften von der personalen Geistigkeit und Kultur” (Husserl 1962:143).

2 Georg Simmel, who viewed himself primarily as a philosopher but in fact, alongside Weber (1864-1920) and Durkheim (1858-1917), is seen as one of the founders of the discipline of sociology, already spoke of (a person’s own) personality ideal (see Lotter, 2000:188).

3 “Dies ist ein charakteristisch neuzeitlicher Sachverhalt, Nicht die Welt, in der ich mich vorfinde, garantiert mein Dasein. Diese Garantie geht nicht verloren, und wenn ich die Welt wiederfinde, dann als Gegenstand meines selbstgewissen Denkens und darum als Objekt, das ich hantieren kann” (Von Weizsäcker, 2002:130-131).

4 Berkeley is known for his slogan: *esse est percipi* (“to be is to be perceived” – see Berkeley, 1710:66). Hume said: “To hate, to love, to think, to feel, to see; all this is nothing but to perceive” (see Hume, 1739, 1,2,6).

natural science ideal represented the “appearance”-side and the personality ideal the “essence”-side (the “thing-in-itself”). Kant was quite explicit about this deepest motivation of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR), for he explains that without distinguishing between “thing-in-itself” (essence) and appearance, it will not be possible to safe-guard freedom: “But if our Critique is not in error in teaching that the object is to be taken *in a twofold sense*, namely as appearance and as thing in itself; if the deduction of the concepts of understanding is valid, and the principle of causality therefore applies only to things taken in the former sense, namely, in so far as they are objects of experience – these same objects, taken in the other sense, not being subject to the principle – then there is no contradiction in supposing that one and the same will is, in the appearance, that is, in its visible acts, necessarily subject to the laws of nature, and so far *not free*, while yet, as belonging to a thing in itself, it is not subject to that law, and is therefore *free*” (Kant 1787-B:xxvii-xxviii).⁵ Later on he reaffirms his position: “My purpose has only been to point out that since the thoroughgoing connection of all appearances, in a context of nature, is an inexorable law, the inevitable consequence of obstinately insisting on the reality of appearances is to destroy all freedom. Those who thus follow the common view have never been able to reconcile *nature and freedom*” (my italics – DS, Kant 1781-A:537 1787-B:565).

According to him those who ascribed an absolute reality to appearances cannot safe-guard human freedom: “The common but fallacious presupposition of the *absolute reality* of appearances here manifests its injurious influence, to the confounding of reason. *For if appearances are things in themselves, freedom cannot be upheld*” (Kant 1787-B:564 – my italics in the last sentence – DS).⁶ Within Kant’s thought this separation of the domains of nature and freedom also assumed the form of the opposition between “is” and “ought” (*Sein* and *Sollen* – see Kant 1787-B:755). Kant explicitly designates the *human soul* as a thing-in-itself (Kant 1787-B:XVII-XVIII).

This inherent dialectics, enclosed in the basic motive of nature and freedom, already brought Kant to a *negative* interpretation of human freedom in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: freedom is seen as being free from natural necessity (Kant 1967-B:561-562).⁷

The freedom motive was carried to its extreme in the philosophy of Schelling, Hegel and Fichte (the so-called *freedom idealism*). In the dialectical tension between necessity and freedom Schelling observes the core of philosophy: “The time has come for the higher distinction or, rather, for a real contrast, to be made manifest, the contrast between Necessity and Freedom, in which alone the innermost center of philosophy

5 Brandom echoes this view when he says that someone is free in subjection to norms but unfree “in terms of the causes which objectively constrain him” (Brandom 1979:192). See the analysis of Brandom’s thought in Jandl (2010:193-220).

6 “Denn, sind Erscheinungen Dinge an sich selbst, so ist Freiheit nicht zu retten” – literally translated: “Therefore, if appearances are things in themselves, then freedom cannot be rescued.”

7 In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant develops a most influential formulation of the way in which nature and freedom presuppose each other dialectically (that is, both oppose and need each other). Although the human understanding applies the category of causality a priori, as a strict natural law to nature, Kant approaches organic nature teleologically. It means that nature is thus portrayed as if its multiplicity of laws is contained in the unifying basis of understanding (Kant 1968-B:VIII). The concept of a natural teleology is proposed by the capacity to judge, in order to function as a mediating concept between the concepts of nature and freedom. However, the purposiveness of nature only functions as a regulative principle to the (reflecting) capacity to judge (Kant 1968-B:LVI). As guiding principle, this natural purposiveness is never to be used in a constitutive way, since our reflecting ability then becomes a determining faculty of judgement, implying that once again we are introducing a new causality (a final cause; *nexus finalis*; cf. 1968-B:269) into natural science (Kant 1968-B:270).

comes to view” (Schelling 1809:333b). Schelling made an attempt to “synthesize” nature and freedom. Yet, according to him, in the absence of the contradiction (*Widerspruch*) between *necessity* and *freedom*, not only philosophy, but also every higher will of the spirit will shrink into insignificance (Schelling 1968:282). As a result of this commitment he believes that a principle of freedom is concealed in nature itself, while history is founded on the hidden principle of necessity. Clearly, the result is not a real “synthesis” or “reconciliation,” since it only amounts to a duplication of the original dialectic: necessity is present within the domain of freedom, and freedom is present within the domain of necessity!

According to Hegel the *idea*, as unity of concept and reality, is the highest truth and within truth itself Hegel finds the “resolution of the highest opposition and contradiction.”

Within it the opposition of *freedom* and *necessity*, *spirit* and *nature*, *knowledge* and *object*, *law* and *drive*, *opposition* and *contradiction* as such, whatever form it may assume, does not any longer have any power. Through this it is shown that neither subjective freedom in itself, separated from necessity, is absolutely true, nor similarly that necessity, isolated in itself, could be attributed with truthfulness ... Philosophy, however, steps into the midst of these contradictory conditions, obtain knowledge of them according to their concept, i.e. as in their non-absolute one-sidedness mutually fused, and positions them within the harmony and unity which is the truth (Hegel 1931:149).

The idea, the *absolute spirit*, which within nature merely is in itself, i.e., not yet “in its truth” (Hegel 1931:141), nonetheless, for Hegel, has its highest determination in *freedom*: “Freedom is the highest determination of the spirit” (Hegel 1931:148)!

Comte soon inspired a renewal of the classical science ideal. His famous *three-stadia-law* was thought of in a *deterministic* sense and this mode of thinking prompted Karl Marx to develop his equally deterministic dialectical understanding of world history (thesis: nobility – antithesis: serfdom; synthesis: capitalist entrepreneurs – antithesis: labourers; up to the final synthesis: the worker's paradise). The only “freedom” humankind has is to accelerate or decelerate this (fully determined) process.⁸

In this way the Kantian idea of *Sollen* (ought) brought to expression the primacy of the personality ideal within modern philosophy, thought through to its extreme in post-Kantian freedom idealism. In the course of the 19th century the normativity of this domain of *ought* obtained a new designation through the use of the term *Wert* (value).

Perhaps Lotze was the first one who made the term “value” (*Wert*) a key term in his teleological idealism. He proceeds from the “desires of the soul” which cannot be explained through a causal-mechanical understanding of nature. One has to separate what is equally valid (nature) from what is valuable, which elevates itself, in the religious *Ahnung* (approximative knowing) to the conception of an absolute value. Lotze finds what is valuable in and of itself in the “idea of the good” (see Lotze 1841 and 1856 and Schlotter, 2004:559; see also Windelband 1935:574 ff., 578).

⁸ In passing we may note that Wittgenstein reveals his indebtedness to the nature-freedom dialectic in the statement: “There are two godheads: the world and my independent I.” (Notebooks, 74,15). Eventually Jaspers understood the impasse of this dialectical development when he remarks: “Since freedom is only through and against nature, as freedom it must fail. Freedom is only when nature is” (Jaspers 1948:871).

However, by the end of the 19th century, within the Baden school of neo-Kantian thought (Windelband, Rickert and Weber), the opposition of *Sein* and *Sollen* was transformed into that of *fact* and *value*. Initially Rickert viewed these values as absolute and timeless, characterized by *being valid* (in German the term *Geltung* = *validity* is used – see Rickert 1902:210, 224, 275, 591). However, soon, owing to the all-permeating effect of historicism, these “absolute” values were *relativized* and “brought down” to the level of human subjectivity and changefulness – every person has to search for his or her *own* values. This entailed the potential threat of having just as many “values” as there may be different persons. At the same time the “factual” part of this dualism continued the legacy of the classical modern science ideal. Mathematics and physics continued to be appreciated as the “exact” sciences, they were supposed to be objective and neutral.⁹ And even after the philosophy of science of the 20th century uprooted this “trust in science” many scholars from the domain of the humanities continued to imitate it. Berger remarks: “Since science is an almost sacred entity among Americans in general and American academicians in particular, the desire to emulate the procedures of the older natural sciences is very strong among the newcomers in the market-place of erudition. ... The irony of this process lies in the fact that natural scientists themselves have been giving up the very positivistic dogmatism that their emulators are still straining to adopt” (Berger 1982:24).

In connection with the human will Schopenhauer kept alive the Kantian demarcation of the science ideal and the personality ideal – phenomena and Things-in-Themselves, i.e. nature and freedom. What is indestructible is not the individual being, but the everything-penetrating, everything-shaping and the everything-disrupting will. Freedom is impossible within the world of phenomena, for it can only exist in the sphere of the “Thing-in-Itself” (cf. Drewermann, 2006-I:48). Drewermann points out that in the psychoanalysis of Freud the I does not belong to the intelligible world, in its merely psychical (phenomenal) existence it is unfree.

After World-War II existentialism restored the freedom motive in the form of an aristocratic irrationalism – the autonomously free individual became the sole norm (Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty). Merleau-Ponty holds that on the one hand *I am my body*, and on the other my body is seen as a *pre-reflexive, pre-personal, anonymous complex* by virtue of its *being-in-the-world* (Merleau-Ponty 1970:79, 80, 82, 83, 86). *Nature* and *freedom* reciprocally endanger and presuppose each other: “... for most of the time personal existence represses the organism without being able either to go beyond it or to renounce itself; without, in other words, being able either to reduce the organism to its existential self, or itself to the organism” (Merleau-Ponty 1970:84). The dialectical movement, to and fro, between these poles is best seen in his following words: “Man taken as a concrete being is not a psyche joined to an organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take

9 Space does not allow us to explain how Husserl wrestled with the dialectic of modern thought, but a fairly detailed analysis of the development of his thought is found in Strauss 2009 (pages 625-631). Enough to say that Husserl’s ideal of philosophy as an irrefutable, apodictically certain science was uprooted by the irrationalistic traits of existentialism which reverted his aim to advance an intuitionistic (transcendental-idealistic) phenomenological science ideal. “Philosophy as science, as a serious, exact, yes apodictic exact science – *der Traum ist ausgeträumt*” (Husserl 1954:508 – “the dream is dreamed”).

corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts (my italics – DS)” (Merleau-Ponty 1970:88).¹⁰

Eventually this irrationalism, in its reaction against every metanarrative and whatever is supposed to be universal, turned into the more recent *postmodern* movement. Naturally, if every person is merely entitled to his or her own “story,” acknowledging more-than-individual norms or principles turns into a serious problem.

3. The after-effect of neo-Kantianism in social thought

We have seen that the Kantian dualism between *is* and *ought* (*Sein* and *Sollen*) returned in the neo-Kantian Baden school in the opposition between *fact* and *value* – respectively representing the legacies of the natural science ideal (the *nature* motive) and the personality ideal (the *freedom* motive). Rickert advanced the view that when factual (natural) reality is related to timeless values (in German designated as the process of *Wertbeziehung*) *culture* appears. He holds that reality could be observed from two different perspectives: viewed from the angle of *universality* it becomes *nature* and seen from the point of view of what is *individual* it becomes *history* and on this basis he distinguishes between generalizing natural sciences and the individualizing historical sciences (Rickert 1913:68-69 173).

As briefly mentioned above, the original Kantian dualism between *is* and *ought* now assumed the form of the opposition between *facts* and *values*. In particular, within sociological thinking, these two poles were designated as *society* (understood in its a-normative factuality) and *culture* (the new “basket-term” for all forms of normativity in its new “subjectivized” form).

Juxtaposing *society* and *culture* brings Sorokin in line with the neo-Kantian kind of separation of *factual relations* and *values*. He designates the totality of personalities existing in factual relationships and processes of interaction as *society*. *Culture*, by contrast, is seen as the *meanings, values* and *norms* internalized by these personalities:

The sphere of socio-cultural interaction is constituted by “society as the totality of interacting personalities, with their socio-cultural relationships and processes,” as well as “culture as the totality of the meanings, values and norms possessed by the interacting persons and the totality of the vehicles which objectify, socialize, and convey these meanings” (Sorokin 1962:63).

The same separation is found in the thought of Parsons who considers it to be of *analytical importance* to distinguish the social system and cultural system in spite of their empirical interrelatedness:

The social-system focus is on the conditions involved in the interaction of actual human individuals who constitute concrete collectivities with determinate membership. The cultural-system focus, on the other hand, is on ‘patterns’ of meaning, e.g., of values, of norms, of organized knowledge and beliefs, of expressive “form” (Parsons 1961:34).

When Turner dedicates his recent work on explaining the normative to the problem of normativity he still operates on the basis of a distinction between the causal and noncausal world (2010:2). On the next page he employs the image of David and Goliath: “The normative is the small boy with the stone against the massive forces in mod-

¹⁰ Van Huyssteen refers to the words of Merleau-Ponty mentioned above (see Merleau-Ponty 1970:75 and Van Huyssteen, 2006:276), but he does not discern the dialectical tension in the thought of Merleau-Ponty.

ern philosophy of naturalism, materialism, physicalism, and causalism.” He mentions the “normativism” of Pufendorf, Kant and the tradition of *Naturrecht* (natural law) which led to a distinction between a deeper reality and the empirical while describing normativity in negative terms: “normativity is the name for the non-natural, non-empirical stuff” (Turner, 2010:5).

Turner alludes to community as a “dual concept,” with “both a normative and a sociological sense” (Turner, 2010:6) and on the next page equates the causal and the sociological when he speaks of the “causal or sociological” on the one hand and “the normative” on the other. Here the “sociological” obtains the same factual-causal connotation as it has in the thought of Sorokin and Parsons. Turner speaks in general but sometime does refer more specifically to domains of normativity, for example when he mentions “particular kinds of normativity, such as legal or semantic normativity.” Law also serves as an example of normativity in his explanations (Turner, 2010:20).¹¹ Within the context of distinguishing between the normative and facts he associates normativity with “meanings, obligations, rationality, and so forth ...” (Turner, 2010:9). He mentions the position of Boghossian who lists a series of peculiarities arising because “meaning properties appear to be neither eliminable nor reducible” (Turner, 2010:12; see Boghossian 1989:548) and also refers to Kelsen and Weber in connection with “the fault line between fact and value, nonnormative and normative” (Turner, 2010:69).

4. The normative inclination of human beings

Whereas Turner hardly exceeds the jural and lingual when he is more specific about normativity, Znaniecki is much more encompassing in his specification of the concept of culture: “The concept which this term symbolizes includes religion, language, literature, art, customs, mores, laws, social organization, technical production, economic exchange, and also philosophy and science” (Znaniecki 1963:9, cf. p.374). Philosophy and science implicitly makes an appeal to the logical-analytical aspect; language to the sign-mode; social organization to the social aspect; economic exchange to the economic aspect; literature and art to the aesthetic aspect; laws to the jural; customs and mores to the moral aspect and religion to the certitudinal aspect.

It can indeed hardly be denied that human beings have a sense of what is right and wrong and that this awareness calls for an openness and responsiveness towards the normativity of human life – either by conforming to or by rejecting those norms guiding human endeavours. Humans are able to discern truth from falseness and what is logically sound from what is illogical, just as they are able to know the difference between what is clear and obscure, frugal and wasteful, beautiful and what is ugly. Although we may differ about what is logical or illogical, frugal or wasteful, legal or illegal, beautiful or ugly, it cannot be denied that these contraries reveal the very meaning of normativity. Humans are simply sensitive to the difference between justice and injustice, they are aware of the benefits of frugality as opposed to the sorrows of wastefulness, they experience lingual ambiguities and their lives are filled with examples of correct and wrong interpretations. They know what courtesy means and how destructive impoliteness may be. Similarly, humankind has heroic and heartbreaking stories to

11 In connection with questions asked by the “normativist” “gap problem” he later on writes: “These banalities of social science do nothing to solve the gap problem – the discrepancy between dispositional or causal explanations and the facts of meaning, rules, correctness, rationality, legality, and so forth that need explanation” (Turner, 2010:45).

tell about what is norm-conformative in a historical sense, such as *reformational* actions, and what is historically *antinormative* or *un-historical*, such as *reactionary* or *revolutionary* events.

Every inter-human endeavour brings to expression this normative dimension of life and is played out within the cosmic theatre of human beings as norm-observing agents. Even in every antinormative action, the human being is constantly haunted by the underlying and presupposed normative awareness of what “ought to be done” – aptly captured by an age-old legacy that designates it as the uniquely human *conscience*.

5. Normativity and the impasse entailed in the modern ideal of autonomy

At this point we have to face the impasse of the modern philosophical idea of *autonomy*: what is the source of the *nomos* (norm/principle) to which the *autos* (the subject) has to orient itself? Let us consider the normativity entailed in our shared human *rationality*, keeping in mind that of old human beings were characterized as *rational* beings, and then investigate the status of the *logical principles* underlying our much admired capacity to be *critical*.

What is striking in the first place is that those who advocate the ideal of “critical thinking” rarely ever say anything about the status and nature of the *criteria* involved in the exercise of criticism. There are basically two options:

- (i) These criteria are *derived from* the rational agent; or
- (ii) They *hold for* rational pursuits.

Let us now briefly look at these two options.

Suppose the criteria for rational conduct are derived from the rational agent herself. This position entails that rational activities *generate* their own norms and that rational behaviour in the full sense of the word is “self-normed,” that is, it is *autonomous*. We noted that this well-known word derives from two Greek words – *autos* = *self* and *nomos* = *law*. According to this position the human being is supposedly a *law-unto-itself*. But what does it entail for supra-individual relationships? The mere idea of *autonomy*, after all, gives rise to many further questions. For example: am I merely “norming” my own (strictly individual) “rational” activities? If the answer is affirmative, the next concern relates to rational interaction between *different* individuals. If all these individuals produce their *own* norms for rationality, will they ever be able to communicate in a “rational” fashion or be able to reach consensus (agreement) about anything? Does the affirmation of rational insights not rather require or presuppose universal normative standards that are not reducible to or derived from the subjectivity of merely one single rational agent? In other words, are we not all bound by *supra-individual* and *non-arbitrary* standards for rational behaviour in the first place?

Kant sensed this difficulty, because it lies at the core of the so-called *Copernican revolution* effectuated in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. The problem is to explain how the (individual) human subject inherently furnishes us with *universal a priori* forms, making possible our knowledge of the phenomena. Kant explicitly contemplates the difficulty involved in this epistemological *turn* when he raises the question how to explain that “subjective conditions of thought can have objective validity, that is, can furnish conditions of the possibility of all knowledge of objects” (Kant 1787, B:122). Clouser aptly captures the impasse of this *subjectivist* stance: “Unless there were already laws governing the mind that were not its creations, what would explain the uniformity of the ways the mind imposes laws on experience” (Clouser, 2005:368)!

Yet, as soon as supra-individual and non-arbitrary standards for rational behaviour are conceded, the initial idea of autonomy is seriously threatened, for implicitly we now have to accept *given* norms for rationality, to which human beings are subjected in their rational endeavours. Consequently, we have to ask a more radical question: does this not show that the idea of autonomy is *self-contradictory*?

In order to answer this question, we have to consider a related long-standing legacy. Since Greek philosophy a *law* is understood as pertaining to the *conditions for the existence of something*. For example, the conditions for *being an atom* hold universally for all atoms. Yet each individual atom is distinct from the *conditions for (law for) being an atom*. It shows this subjection to the law in its *orderliness* or *lawfulness* (in its *being-an-atom*). That is to say: the conditions for being an atom are not themselves an atom, just as little as the conditions for being *red* are themselves red. In its *being-an-atom* every *individual* atom, in a *universal* way, shows that it is subjected to the universal conditions for (law for) being-an-atom.

Of course there is an important difference between a (natural) law and a norm (or: principle) and whatever is subjected to them – even in the case of rationality. This does not only imply that rationality is normed, i.e., that it is subject to universal normative standards transcending the individual, since this *subjectedness* prompts us to reflect on the nature of these *norms for* rationality. The moment we start to investigate this matter, we are inescapably confronted with direction-giving ultimate commitments, transcending the realm of rationality itself – since they are embedded in one or another (pre-theoretical) world and life view.

Popper, for example, questions an uncritical or comprehensive rationalism based upon “the principle that any assumption which cannot be supported either by argument or by experience is to be discarded” (Popper 1966-II:230). According to him this kind of rationalism is inconsistent in terms of its own criteria: since “all arguments must proceed from assumptions, it is plainly impossible to demand that all assumptions should be based on argument” (Popper 1966-II:230). Uncritical rationalism does not realize that the faith in the rationality of reason is not itself rational – therefore Popper speaks of an *irrational faith in reason* (Popper 1966-II:231). Stegmüller, a well-known philosopher of science from the second half of the 20th century, phrased it in a slightly different way when he says that there is no single domain in which a self-guarantee of human thinking exists – one already has to *believe* in something in order to justify something else (Stegmüller 1969:314).¹²

Is it possible to avoid the impasse entailed in the idea of autonomy? The answer to this question will be dealt with in the promised follow-up article in which an alternative avenue will be pursued, aiming at a more encompassing, consistent and integral (non-dialectical) understanding of normativity.

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¹² Popper is aware of the fact that behind the idea of an “assumptionless” approach, a huge assumption hides itself – something eventually also criticized by the prominent hermeneutical philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his mocking of *the prejudice of Enlightenment against prejudices* (cf. Gadamer 1989:276).

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