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Cultural relativity, ethical relativism and the immutability of the human nature: Some considerations on philosophical anthropology

Relatividade cultural, relativismo ético e a imutabilidade da natureza humana: Algumas considerações sobre a antropologia filosófica

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RESUMO

Alfred Stein, em memória de quem esse artigo é dedicado, mantinha, enquanto filósofo da história, a crença em valores absolutos como obsoletos bem como, enquanto filósofo da ética, o convencimento sobre a aleatoriedade relativista-cultural na valoração moral da ação humana. De uma tal valoração aparece indicado reconstruir a ação adequadamente, ou seja, compreendê-la intencionalmente e explicá-la por meio da causalidade. No decorrer desse compreender e desse explicar, se deve fazer uma referência a isso que Stern com, entre outros, Blaise Pascal, chama de "a condição humana" (*la condition humaine*): o fato de que o humano é um ser consciente de si mesmo, de que ele é determinado por uma vontade de autopreservação, de que ele ama e odeia, de que ele sofre, busca escapar do sofrimento, de que ele sabe de sua mortalidade e, por fim, morre. De maneira semelhante à *anthropéia physis* de Thukydides, essas condições variantes resultam decorrer

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de ação bem diferentes e padrões de comportamento, de acordo com as especificidades da situação histórica – parecido com como um balão sobe, sob o efeito da mesma lei da gravidade, uma pedra, entretanto, cai ao chão. Seguindo essa construção compreensivo-explicativa da ação, vêm a sua valoração moral. Esta é, com Stein, guiada pelo princípio da liberdade como de um ser-livre de pressão e pelo princípio da maior minimização possível do sofrimento humano.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Antropologia filosófica; relatividade cultural; relativismo ético; imutabilidade da natureza humana

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG
Alfred Stern, dessen Andenken dieser Beitrag gewidmet ist, hielt als Geschichtsphilosoph den Glauben an absolute Werte für gleichermaßen obsolet wie als Ethiker die Überzeugung von der kulturrelativistischen Beliebigkeit in der moralischen Beurteilung menschlichen Handelns. Vor einer solchen Beurteilung erscheint es geboten, das Handeln angemessen zu rekonstruieren, also intentional zu verstehen und kausal zu erklären. Im Verlauf dieses Verstehens und Erklärens soll eine Bezugnahme auf das erfolgen, was Stern unter anderem mit Blaise Pascal die „menschliche Daseinsbedingung“ (*la condition humaine*) nennt: die Tatsache, dass der Mensch ein seiner selbst bewusstes Wesen ist, dass er von einem Willen zur Selbsterhaltung bestimmt ist, dass er liebt und hasst, dass er leidet, dem Leiden zu entkommen sucht, dass er um seine Sterblichkeit weiß und letztlich stirbt. Ähnlich wie die *anthropéia phýsis* des Thukydides ergeben diese invarianten Bedingungen je nach den Besonderheiten der geschichtlichen Situation ganz unterschiedliche Handlungsverläufe und Verhaltensmuster – ähnlich wie unter der Wirkung desselben Gravitationsgesetzes ein Ballon in die Höhe steigt, ein Stein jedoch zur Erde fällt. Auf die verstehende und erklärende Rekonstruktion des Handelns folgt dessen moralische Bewertung. Diese ist bei Stern geleitet durch das Prinzip der Freiheit als des Freiseins von Zwang und das Prinzip der größtmöglichen Minimierung menschlichen Leides.

STICHWORT
Philosophical anthropology; cultural relativity; ethical relativism; immutability of the human nature

INTRODUCTION

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Alfred Stern
on the 40th anniversary of his death.

Intimately linked as it was with the axiom of the immutability of human nature, historical pragmatism considered history as a collection of examples of practical use to mankind. Since Polybius, historical pragmatism provided object lessons. Human nature was held to be invariable, and therefore all the ages were in principle alike; whoever knew one thoroughly knew them all. Thus Machiavelli warned that nothing

was more dangerous for a prince than to disregard the teachings of history. Bossuet, too, in his *Discourse sur l'Histoire Universelle à Monseigneure le Dauphin*, thought that a statesman, when confronted with a concrete situation, would always find an analogous case in history. He summed up his own ideas of historical pragmatism by writing:

> If experience is necessary to acquire that wisdom which makes good rulers, there is nothing more useful for their instruction than to combine their every-day experiences with the examples of past centuries. (BOSSUET, 1836, p. 151)

In the early nineteenth century, however, Hegel rebelled against historical pragmatism with the following arguments:

> One advises rulers, statesmen, nations to heed the lessons of history. [...] But every period has such peculiar circumstances, each is to so large an extent an individual situation that one must and can decide only from within it and by growing out of it. In the tumult of world affairs, no general principle and no remembrance of similar conditions help us, for a pale memory has no power against the vitality and liberty of the present. (HEGEL apud STERN, 1952, p. 10)

What are the reasons for this change of argument? Are there any historical events in the time between Bossuet and Hegel, which may help to explain this entirely new spirit of historical thinking?

The general shape of the field of inactivity in Europe had been radically changed, particularly especially by the industrial revolution in England and by the political revolution in France - both had a massive impact on the earlier idea of the immutability of the modes of production, of the structure of society, and of individual and social values. There was, however, a muted revolution (as it were) which took place as a consequence of cultural encounters - or rather, violent clashes brought about by the most influential European maritime nations between the 16th and the 18th century: this revolution was the equivalent of a mental turning-away from dogmatic self-certainty to a more contextualizing comparison, in other words: this silent revolution consisted in a new way of looking at societal, moral and religious affairs from an anthropological point of view.

1. FROM ANTHROPOLOGY TO THE IDEA OF HISTORISM AND HISTORICITY

The term "anthropology" (*anthropologia*) was coined in Germany as an ancient Greek loanword and remained restricted to German speaking areas until the late 18th century. Here the study of man had been so called since 1501. (cf. DIEM, 1962, p. 360; cf. MARQUAD, 1971) The beginnings of anthropology put forward a theory of man that considered his two aspects: the physical, and the mental. Like the very word *anthropologia*, this theory was a creation of Humanism. It aimed at the emancipation of the study of man from the fetters of theology in order to base it on positive knowledge. Anthropology remained a recognized branch of German philosophy during the early modern period, reaching its peak in Kant's *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* published in 1798.

By the end of 18th century in Western Europe, a "science of man" (*science de l'homme*) had developed, which combined the physiology of the human species (in the manner of Harvey in England and Broussais in France) with moral and economic considerations (in the manner of the French Moralists and the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment) as well as with the history of the progress of mankind towards civilization (not unlike Locke, Voltaire and Condorcet). Scholars like Georg Forster the German-born cosmopolitan, who died in 1794, equated this "new Science" with *anthropologia* and thereby introduced that term to Western Europe. Here it took roots and flourished with the scientific community. Through Franz Boas the concept aquired new importance within the matrix of scientific disciplines: this émigré scientist baptized *Völkerkunde* and ethnology "cultural anthropology", and - around World War I - founded modern US-ethnography and -ethnology. In 19th century Germany, however, anthropology more and more narrowly concerned the study of the "physical" - i.e. the anatomical, physiological and biochemical - aspects; it became a recognised natural science at the end of the century.

The dominant position of the "physical" and the diminishing importance of the "mental" in 19th century German anthropology was paralleled by the upsurge of historical scholarship and its accompanying attitude of "historism" - a position which understood cultures as being grounded in themselves. Historism is by no means to be identified with 'historicism' in a Hegelian or a Popperian sense. As we know, Popper's fixation on Hegel has loomed all other aspects of German historism - which infact corresponds neither to the Hegelian conception of a teleological evolution of particular peoples nor to universal history. Several important innovations in the field of moral sciences need to be considered in order fully to understand this ascent of historism.

There existed several forerunners to this intellectual movement: among them Charles de Montesquieu with his famous *Lettres Persanes* (1721, enlarged 1754) and the influential *L'esprit des lois* (1748) in France, and Johann Martin Chladenius, in

Germany, who practiced a very stimulating socio-historical perspectivism in his *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* (1752) - a general scholarly history. Of particular importance, however, were a fistful of terms denoting new disciplines which were gaining ground in Germany; instead of the abstract concept of "human nature" stressing the unity of mankind, these new terms emphasized the concrete life of groups of human beings in space and time and, consequently, the diversity of mankind. The terms "ethnography", "ethnology", "*Völkerkunde*" and "*Volkskunde*" were all coined in Germany between 1771 and 1783, and have been in use ever since; like "anthropology", they spread to the main European languages in the 19th century.

As Justin Stagl has shown, (cf. STAGL, 1995, p. 242-268) the winding paths of all these *éthnos*-names ultimately lead back to one period (the 1770s and 1780s), one place (the University of Göttingen) and mainly one man: August Ludwig Schlözer (1735-1809), author of a then well-known *Universal-Historie*, published in 1772, to whom "culture" was the central category in all historical understanding. According to Schlözer, the ethnographic method describes all peoples "with loving care and deliberation [...] in their details", though always with regard to a system of universal history: "From the jumble of information [...] it selects [...] only really great actions, together with their mainsprings. [...] All the rest is cinders for it." (SCHLÖZER apud STAGL, 1995, p. 257) According to Schlözer, these "mainsprings" - a concept taken over from Montesquieu and Voltaire (*ressorts*) - consist for any people

> […] partly in the condition of its country and the number of its inhabitants, partly in its constitution, its legislation extending to all branches of policy, its culture in customs, religion and sciences, and its industry in agriculture, trade and manufactures. (SCHLÖZER apud STAGL, 1995, p. 257).

The "culture" Schlözer refers to in this quotation is culture in the singular, the process of the cultivation or civilization of all mankind. A true *Völkerkunde* in the sense of cultural anthropology, however, uses culture also in the plural ("cultures"), thus underscoring the uniqueness of the cultural synthesis arrived at by every people. Exactly this usage is an essential characteristic of German historism.

The originator of the historistic approach, however, was not an enlightened author like Chladenius or Schlözer, but Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), the great precursor of romanticism. With Herder the sense of particularities was strengthened among German historians and philosophers at the end of the 18th century whereas up to that time enlightenment philosophers were in favour of the generalities of human nature.

Already some time before Herder, Montesquieu, the most historically minded French philosopher of the enlightenment period, who was highly respected among German historistic thinkers, remarked that he had seen Italians, Frenchmen, Spaniards, etc., but that he had never met the extra-temporal man himself.[2] And the same historistic particularism is present in the time after Herder, when, for instance, Hegel declared straightforwardly:

> Das Individuum ist ein solches, das da ist, nicht ein Mensch überhaupt, denn der existiert nicht, sondern ein bestimmter (HEGEL, 1928, p. 52) - the individual is someone that is real, not man in general, for such a being does not exist, but a particular man.

Instead of insisting on analogies between nations and individuals, which were found to be superficial, German historism tried to capture what is specific in each nation, in each civilization, and in each epoch. The predominant question was: What distinguishes each of these entities from all the others? So Savigny, in his famous book *Vom Berufe unserer Zeit für Gesetzgebung und Rechtswissenschaft* (1814) - of the mission of our time (i.e., Savigny's time) for legislation and jurisprudence - pleads the cause of a juridical pluralism and sets against natural right not only a multiplicity of national rights but even of regional rights. Unlike Jean Jacques Rousseau's and his theory of the general will (*volonté générale*) Savigny was convinced that the imposition of a general body of law would stifle the full development of a commonwealth, the positive effects of interrelations between particular, federalist entities. German historism reproached the rationalism of the French revolution and of nearly all the Enlightenment mainly with being indifferent to history. In insisting on what is common to all men - reason, rationalist philosophers, historians and social scientists had neglected what distinguishes one man from another, viz., those occult and even irrational forces which determine the specific individuality of each nation, and which are manifested in its history. As Alfred Stern stated, in German historism,

> […] the common rational features of mankind, supposed to be eternal, were superseded by those irrational vital forces which are characteristic of each nation and are the product of a slow historical evolution, of an organic growth in the soil of tradition. (STERN, 1962, p. 146)

With Alfred Stern, it should however be emphasized that Herder, in spite of his worship of the irrational, did not abandon the humanistic ideals of the Stoics and of

[2] It was, however, on the claimed existence of the latter that Montesquieu himself built the thesis of natural right.

their enlightened followers. For he still regarded mankind as a multi-faceted organism and rejected, in his famous *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*,[3] the term "human races" as "ignoble" insofar it is connected with an apriori idea of an intellectual and moral superiority or inferiority of ethnic groups or entire nations. Some of the later proponents of the historistic world-vision, however, abandoned this humanistic heritage.

With German historism the historical sense that was predominant during the 18th century gained a different emotional tonality. Voltaire, for instance, never tired of saying how happy he felt as the child of an enlightened century which had vanquished the barbarity and superstition of ancient times. And in an excessively enthusiastic mood, Condorcet drew his conviction of the indefinite progress of mankind from the triumphantly scientific vision of the world which had arisen in the 16th century. To them, as to a great number of historical pragmatists in the century of Enlightenment, the old Latin proverb *historia vitae magistra* ("history is the teacher of life") had not lost its validity. Since man is the creator of his own destiny, the study of history not only makes us more erudite but also more efficient.

Although some forms of a pragmatic understanding of history have survived, historical pragmatism in the narrow sense, as practiced, for instance, by Condorcet, has disappeared. In the first place, this was due to historism with its insistence on the individuality and singularity of each nation and each historical situation. A second factor that shook the belief in a 'human nature' and its alleged immutability, and that contributed to the disappearance of historical pragmatism's simple equations and analogies was Darwin's theory of evolution. In varying historical situations created by freely developing human beings, actions cannot be foreseen, since human actions are thought to be the result of an active and passive adjustment of human agents to their environment.

Thus, historism and Darwinism triggered an intellectual crisis in the unquiet days after the First World War - mainly, of course, among the loser-nations. Many Germans and former Austro-Hungarians understood that their political, economic and social lives were neither to be conceived as an entity dependent solely on their free will nor as a natural product but as the historical result of their collective consciousness and of their political and economic circumstances. After 1918, in a changing world, the survival of that national and international 'old order' could no longer be taken for granted - neither by men and women in the street nor by academe (that had already abandoned those beliefs).

Today, at a time of economic and cultural globalization, there is a near-recognition in several parts of the world that history is a collective destiny from

[3] *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, vol. 4, ch. V. cf. STERN (1991).

which individuals, groups, or even entire nations, can hardly escape. Not only are we subjects or creators of history, but we are also the creatures of historical structures, processes and events. What some recent proponents of cultural criticism, often not well acquainted with the history of ideas, call the "new" historical sense under "postmodern" conditions, comes close to that phenomenon which Jean-Paul Sartre, more than half a century ago and partly following Martin Heidegger's analysis of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*), called the discovery of man's historicity. In his essay "*Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*" ("*What is Literature?*"), Sartre described that awakening of a peculiar historic sense in French thought during the interwar-period:

> Suddenly it became necessary to envisage those first years of World peace as the last years of the period between-two-wars; ... We noticed that our individual lives which had seemed to depend only upon our efforts, our virtues and defects, ... were governed ... by obscure collective forces ... At a single blow we felt ourselves bluntly '*situated*' ... There was a collective adventure which appeared in the future and which was going to be *our* adventure. Historicity reflowed upon us. In everything we touched, in the air we breathed ... we discovered something like a taste of history ... The pressure of history revealed to us suddenly the interdependence of nations ... an incident in Shanghai was a scissors' cut into our destiny - but at the same time it placed us back, in spite of ourselves, into our national collectivity. (SARTRE apud STERN, 1962, p. 14)

This masterful description of the discovery of man's historicity by the French expresses concretely what we have tried to characterize abstractly under the name of historicity: a feeling of changing habits, attitudes and values between crumbling walls of political and economic circumstances - together with the conviction that this crumbling is only partly, if at all, due to the behaviour of the people inside these walls.

2. FROM HISTORY TO THE INCOMMENSURABILITY OF CULTURES

Historism did not remain a radical conception: indeed, it sometimes changed into an overradicalized second-order relativism, which represents the third of the following three stages. First, an insight how variable are all wordly things, subject to development, even disappearance; second, an insight into the historical conditioning of ways of life, habits, mores, ethical and aesthetic values and norms; third, the conviction that there are not only culture-dependent changes of habits, attitudes and values but also intellectual procedures which change from time to time and which have their culture-specific modes and standards.

When Gaius Plinius Secundus (i. e. Plinius Maior), who died 79 a. C., in his *Naturalis Historia* stated: "*veritas et virtus filiae temporis*" - truth and value are daughters of time, he expressed his conviction that in the long run truth will come to light. A quite different meaning was given to this formula by proponents of late-romanticist historism. As Alfred Stern has shown, they understood it as

> […] an historical relativism which considers truth, right, customs, ethics and, in general, all ideas and all values as products of a given historical epoch, of a specific civilization, or even of a definite national or regional collectivity. Consequently, these ideas and values are valid only for the epochs, the civilizations and, in extreme cases, only for the nations or provinces which produced them. (STERN, 1962, p. 138)

As a further consequence, *all* ideas and *all* values created in the course of history would appear to be justified by the fact that they constitute a necessary element in the great chain of being - even the ideas and values of those epochs which appear to us most barbarian. Since no idea, no value - not even the criterion of rationality - is free from historical conditions generating them, any idea of transcultural and transhistorical truths and values, which would allow us to judge of the truths and values created by different cultures at different historical epochs, appeared to be obsolete. Such a relativism seems to be not so much the result of a comparison between different epochs of a particular culture or of different cultures, it is rather the outcome of an individual conflict of values, in someone who belongs to more than one culture or value system. Fiction offers a number of instructive examples in this respect, as do the writings of famous men of letters.

Thomas Mann's novella *Tonio Kröger*, published in 1903, is a story both of emancipation from the *milieu* of the author's youth, and of a lingering regret for an unproblematical world of well-scrubbed order. It is, in the protagonist's words, the story of:

> […] a *bourgeois* who strayed off into art, a bohemian who feels nostalgic yearnings for respectability, an artist with a bad conscience. I stand between two worlds. I am at home in neither, and I suffer in consequence. [...] I admire those proud, cold beings who adventure upon the paths of great and daemonic beauty and despise "mankind"; but I do not envy them. For if anything is capable of making a poet of a literary man, it is my *bourgeois* love of the human, the living and usual. It is the source of all warmth, goodness, and humour. (MANN, 1936, p. 132)

Thomas Mann had not yet learned to harmonize those conflicting tendencies in his mind; a satisfactory reconciliation of opposites would come only in the mid-1920's. Although they reflect the precarious relations between socio-cultural and political world-views (*Weltanschauungen*), Mann's conflict of roles are, however, of a rather traditional kind. Much more severe, since of an aporetic character, were the challenges posed by relativism in Max Weber's writings.

Weber was certainly not a relativist in the sense of being a radical sceptic: he did not question the whole notion of rationality and of responsible choice. However, Weber may well be called a sceptical philosopher in that he denied any metaphysical certainty with regard to values underlying ethics, aesthetics or the philosophy of historical progress. He frankly recognized the subjective, affective origin of his own convictions: he found no ultimate basis for them. There was thus, as H. Stuart Hughes convincingly demonstrates, a kind of desperation about Weber's own choices:

> He had, for example, a profound belief in the value of human freedom. But he saw how problematical was the future of freedom in a society that seemed inexorably headed toward rationalization and bureaucratization. At the same, he realized, the process of rationalization itself could not be rejected out of hand. As the direct product of disciplined reason, it necessarily received his intellectual endorsement. And reason itself, Weber hat always argued, was at the source of human freedom. Hence, he was obliged to affirm as best he could the values of freedom *within* the framework of a rationalized society. (HUGHES, 1979, p. 331-332)

Weber held to those value-decisions with a passion for which he could offer no philosophical justification - later generations named that stance "decisionism".

To the generation of scholars of radicalized historism, meanwhile well-established as cultural relativists in the field of various ethno-sciences, everything begins to totter and fall - even the fortress of logical and empirical rationality. There are, even nowadays, not a few philosophers and cultural anthropologists who seem to be convinced that there is no logical or epistemological standard which can be found valid irrespective of its cultural and historical setting. The problem was already perceived in this acuteness by a remarkable group of scholars in the period between the two World Wars, especially by sociologists of knowledge in the tradition of Wilhelm Jerusalem, Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim, and, of course, by historians. Among the latter an international debate on the scholarly status of historical disciplines was opened, which could be seen to be of crucial importance to the humanities and to the social sciences.

"*Tempora sunt tria, praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris*", (AUGUSTINUS, 1997) Saint Augustine already stated as early as the fifth century - there are three periods of time: the past in the present, the present in the present, the future in the present. In the 19th and 20th centuries several philosophers insisted on the impact of the past on present historical experience, and also on a retroactive effect of the present and of the future on the past. So to Dilthey, as it had been to Hegel, history was the scholars discipline which reflects the present in the past and, at once, the meaning of the past is seen in our conception of the future.[4] Bergson also spoke explicitly of a "*mirage du présent dans le passé*" - a mirage of the present in the past - and showed how Romanticism acted on classicism: "Retroactively it created its own prefiguration in the past and an explanation of itself by its antecedents." (BERGSON, 1934, p. 23)

However, it is not on the ontological level of history as a scholarly discipline, but on the gnoseological level of the humanities in general that we are confronted with the issue of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism in its most powerful form started with a critique of one of the pillars of occidental philosophy, i.e. the Cartesian view that we have a faculty of Reason which can and ought to govern our passions. The relativistic critique of the modern Western philosophical conception of rationality addresses the question of context: one in which this concept can be applied, and another in which it cannot. The debate pinpoints the sometimes fundamental disagreement among modern philosophers and also among philosophically orientied sociologists and cultural anthropologists, who, according to Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, in a rough and approximate sense fall into two broad schools: "unifiers" or lumpers *versus* "relativizers" or splitters. (cf. TAMBIAH, 1990, p. 115) On the basis of family resemblance, Tambiah sees scholars like Alasdair MacIntyre, Ernest Gellner and Steven Lukes as "unifiers", and Wittgenstein, Peter Winch and Barry Barnes as "relativizers". (cf. in this context HOLLIS; LUKES, 1982) Whereas "unifiers" argue that there can be only one rationality based on universally valid rules of logic and inference, "relativizers" propose a kind of epistemological pluralism: there can be multiple "rationalities", different "language games" and "forms of life" (Wittgenstein) and some of these can be *incommensurable* activities.

We have now reached a stage of argument where we can interrelate three notions used repeatedly in recent discussions by both philosophers and anthropologists: rationality, commensurability of cultures, and their translation. The question of commensurability of cultures concerns the different ways of performing

[4] Cf. Wilhelm DILTHEY: "Was wir unter Zukunft als Zweck setzen, bedingt die Bestimmung der Bedeutung des Vergangenen" - the goals we are setting ourselves for the future determine, and are determined by, the meaning of the past. (Wilhelm DILTHEY: Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften [= Gesammelte Schriften, vol. VII], 7th ed., Stuttgart-Göttingen 1979, p. 233).

and perceiving social actions and their manifold results and, speaking from the point of view of a particular culture, between "their" concepts and categories and "ours". In this respect, at least in certain phases of their scientific writing, Oswald Spengler and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (cf. SPENGLER, 1918-1922; cf. LÉVY-BRUHL, 1921) argued very decisively that the various cultures are characterized not only by different forms of life, works of art, and styles of reasoning, but also by different forms of logical thinking - each based on an ethnocentric logic in its own right. Of course, there are, as good anthropology has shown repeatedly, the ever-present dangers of making "category mistakes" and misplaced comparisons. We cannot, however, declare the logical basis we are presupposing in anthropological comparisons to be in the same sense a culture-dependent phenomenon as are the phenomena we are considering. In Spengler's and in Lévy-Bruhl's arguments we can observe a confusion which is also present in some anthropological or culturalist writing nowadays. Not infrequently, the validity of rational canons is delegitimated as a consequence of a category mistake: such a mistake would consist in applying judgements of rationality to phenomena that are aesthetic, religious, and affectively charged. Such judgements are shaped according to the prerequisites of logic and empirical science. As a consequence, a misapplication of rational canons may then serve to deny the general validity of a rational canon.

Contemporary socio-cultural relativists are mostly heirs of the past though they may claim to have opened a peculiar and innovative "postmodern" or "deconstructionist" discourse of their own invention. In this way, and not unlike Spengler and Lévy-Bruhl, the sociologist Pitirim A. Sorokin believed in a fundamental incommensurability of cultures. According to Sorokin, cultures have different styles of reasoning of their own and, correspondingly, different standards of truth. What Sorokin's sociology of knowledge tries to prove is summed up in the following passage taken from his *Social and Cultural Dynamics*:

> When a culture passes from, say the Ideational to the Sensate type, or vice versa, all its art, philosophy, religion, science, ethics, and law undergo the same profound transformation. From this standpoint, the volume attempts to demonstrate that what a given society regards as true or false, scientific or unscientific, right or wrong, lawful or unlawful, beautiful or ugly, is conditioned fundamentally by the nature of the dominant culture. (PITIRIM, 1937, p. VII)

In other words: to those who do not adopt them, empirical verification and logical consistency are in no way a necessary requirement of truth. What is considered to be a valid criterion of truth and what is not, is a function of socio-cultural variables. And since the latter change in the course of history, Sorokin's

cultural relativism is tantamount to radical historism. Thus, according to Sorokin, we have to accept the possibility

> that, in some future time, the present empirical system of truth will also decline. It is at least as probable as the belief that, in the future, the empirical system of truth will grow perpetually. (PITIRIM, 1937, p. 33)

To be sure, the scientific and technological civilization that is spreading all over the world is only one of many civilizations produced in history. On this earth there are hundreds of millions of men - certain religious communities in India, for example - who do not believe in progress and do not consider logical consistency and empirical verification as the only valid criteria of truth. I readily admit that the light of Graeco-Roman antiquity was obscured during a long period of collective amnesia regarding mathematical, technological, medical and historical knowledge as well as philosophical wisdom. But Greek science was theoretical and was - even in its more applied forms among the Romans - the privilege of a small elite. In contrast to modern science since the 16th century in Western Europe it never changed the way of life of the great majority of men and women.

Thus, I cannot agree with Sorokin, since I do not believe that the chances of a growth or a decline of scientism in the future are the same. This, it seems to me, is due to the fact that the empirico-logical style of reasoning has convinced large numbers of people with respect to the benefit of instrumental rationality; subsequently, it has spread and is spreading over the earth by way of a progressive assimilation of minds to each other. (We shall deal with particular reasons of this process and with specific limits to it in the final section IV).

3. FROM CULTURAL INCOMMENSURABILITY TO THE IDEA OF HUMAN UNIVERSALS

According to the proponents of radical historism, historical man alone exists, as a child of his epoch who thinks the ideas of his epoch. Correspondingly, the adherents of socio-cultural relativism are convinced that cultural man alone exists, a child of his particular culture who thinks the ideas of his culture. Thus, as Hegel stated, "each [individual] is inevitably a *son of his time*", (HEGEL, 1928, p. 35) whereas truth, as we have seen, was thought to be "the daughter of time" (*veritas temporis filia*). However, if we were indeed nothing more than children of our epoch, this would not only justify the idea of an incommensurability of cultures, but also the idea of an incommensurability of epochs within one and the same culture.

Hegel had conceived of man as a mere creature of his time, and of the success of individuals, nations or of entire civilizations, as a victory of reason, since he regarded the accomplished fact as the expression of a logic inherent in history. Those positions found their greatest opponent in Nietzsche, whose criticism of Hegel's teleological historicism had positive effects on European intellectuals around 1900: it tried to encourage "the great fighters against history", who swim against the main currents of history, contrasting their shout of protest "Things should be otherwise!" with history's fatalistic cry "This is the way things were, and are". (cf. NIETZSCHE, 1963, p. 209-285, specially p. 262-265) A similar position is adopted by Ernst Cassirer, who writes: "The great thinkers of the past were not only "their own times apprehended in thought". Very often, they had to think beyond and against their times." (CASSIRER, 1955, p. 373) Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to conclude that those who, in a given epoch, think against the currents of their time, also think 'against history' in every respect. To a certain extent, they cannot escape its ascendancy. Thus, Alfred Stern stated:

> For the solitary thinker who opposes the currents of his time does not arise in an historical vacuum. He rises in an historical world, in a definite civilization and at a certain historical moment, when certain theses have become the credo of the majority. Thus, even the ideas the so-called revolutionary against history proclaims against his time are still thoughts of this time: the antitheses conditioned by the theses of this time. In this way, Nietzsche's and Camus' theses against the Historicism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are revealed as the antitheses of the theses of these times and, therefore, as daughters of their times, as children of history who detest their mother. (STERN, 1962, p. 161-162)

If, however, each individual is a son (Hegel) or a daughter (A. Stern) of his time - at least at a certain extent -, it becomes obvious that no philosopher, no scientist can ever attain or lay claim to absolute truth. Otherwise, if a philosopher were to claim to have reached absolute truth, say, about the natural and social world or about moral and aesthetic values, he would, implicitly, be claiming to have accomplished, as a single individual, what only the whole human species can achieve in its progressive evolution from its beginnings to the very end of its history. Therefore, the concept of absolute truth or absolute knowledge is not a human category - consequently, Hegel considered it to be the quality of God, or of the "world-spirit".

The epistemological oddity of absolute or total truth has its symmetrical counterpart in the concept of absolute or total relativism - Karl Kraus, the Austrian literary critic, invented the daring metaphor of an exemplary relation of "convex" to "concave lunacy". To Hilary Putnam, as already to Ernst Grünwald and Alexander

von Schelting before him, (cf. PUTNAM, 1981; cf. GRÜNWALD, 1934, specially ch. 2; cf. SCHELTING, 1934) in the early 1930s, the idea of total relativism is inconsistent to the same extent as the idea of total truth is inoperable. Quipping that "if all is relative, then the relative is relative too", Putnam gives once again a more searching account of relativism's implications: the relativist (he argues), in holding that a proposition *p* is true or justified relative to the standards and circumstances of a given historical time and a particular cultural space, accepts this judgement as something "absolute", i. e. as valid as long as it resists refutation. If a statement *p* is true (justified) relative to a person, group, or culture, then there is, after all, an *absolute notion of validity* concerning a relative truth. A *total* relativist, on the contrary, would have to say that whether or not *p* is true *relative* to a person, group or culture "is *itself* relative". (cf. PUTNAM, 1981, ch. 5, especially p. 120-121)

However, the act of judging past or foreign civilizations according to our own present standards is also done under specific circumstances - in a given historical time and in a particular cultural space. We may therefore ask ourselves: in taking the relation of our value-judgement to the actually existing circumstances as confirmation of the content of this value-judgement, do we not fall into the error of a new absolutism? Do we not in this case, as Alfred Stern asks,

> […] follow the road of Voltaire, who regarded the spiritual values of the century of Louis XIV as absolute standards, as norms for measuring the values of past civilizations and as "the example for posterity"? Evidently, we cannot decree the absolute supra-historical character of our values by a *sic volo, sic jubeo* [- so I want it to be and so I order it to be, K. A.], for our values are only historical products [...]." (STERN, 1962, p. 185)

However, there is no need (I believe) to commit these errors since there is, as Stern confirms, "a middle of the road between the extremes of absolutism and the total relativism" of an unbridled historism. (STERN, 1962, p. 185) It is evidently insincere to say, with the proponents of total historism or, of cultural relativism, that the 15th and 16th centuries, or even later periods in European history, had a "right" to burn the so-called witches, since this usage corresponded to their standards of values - as if there had been no critics of witch-burning during those centuries. Such an affirmation is insincere first, because it ignores the normative diversity of past - as well as present - times and, second, because it does not concede something like normative validity to a single one of our moral judgements. Thus, it would be more sincere to judge other epochs and other civilizations with regard to some of their traits by virtue of our own standards of values as long as we recognize the relativity of our standards to our epoch and our civilization and to recognize the right of future

and foreign civilizations to judge of our standards by virtue of theirs. But what is the common denominator of different cultures that seems to authorize us to argue in favour of such a symmetric relation of cultures evaluating each other?

Cultural diversity apparently contains elements which remain the same, and historical change includes elements which do not change. It is the permanence of these elements that secures historico-cultural continuity. The question, however, still remains: what does this continuity consist in? What is it founded on? I shall try to draw on European philosophers of life and on existentialist philosophers for some insights.

Like Wilhelm Dilthey and José Ortega y Gasset, Jean-Paul Sartre rejected the concept of human nature and, in so doing, took a first step toward radical historism. As an Existentialist, he denied that man's essence precedes his historical existence. And yet, even the historism of Sartre's Existentialism has its limits. On the one hand, the author of *Being and Nothingness* declares that there is no human nature in an essentialist sense and that "men depend on their epoch and not upon a human nature". (SARTRE, 1946, p. 136). On the other hand he admits a kind of human universality, a "human condition" (*une condition humaine*), in Blaise Pascal's sense. Like other thinkers who consider human contingency, Sartre understands by the human condition those limits in their entirety which circumscribe the fundamental situation of human beings. Though the historical situations may vary, man cannot but be born into a world where he has to act in order to stay alive.

Following Alfred Stern, this is a kind of human universality which we may, indeed, regard as trans-historic, and, one may add, as a basis for considering the origin and formation of value-judgements, but by no means as a reason for historical or cultural relativism:

> While denying a human nature, we admit [...] the existence of a human condition, which, common to all men, is manifested in a fundamental attitude to life, suffering and death. The historical situations are changing and so are the intellectual and moral capacities of men. What does not change in the course of history is the fact that man is a being conscious of his existence, that he is in the world, that he has to act in order to maintain himself in existence, that he loves and hates, that he propagates himself, falls ill, suffers, tries to escape from suffering, that he knows he must die, fears death and finally dies. (STERN, 1962, p. 199, cf. also p. 178)

In Stern's opinion, this human condition is a constant in history, independent of civilizations and their degrees of evolution, and also independent of social environments. Here certain value judgements (Stern concludes) open up a breach in the solid wall of historical relativism indicating certain fundamental value

judgements, common to all men of all historical epochs and all social habitats. These consist in ascribing to a full life and health a positive value, and to suffering and premature death a negative one. (cf. STERN, 1962, p. 199-200)

Summing up, we may conclude for the time being that it is not correct to assume that the most we can hope to do in anthropology is to describe human beings as they are at this time in our particular cultures and societies - what they believe, hope for, dread. To put it metaphorically, we need to show an interest not only in clothes but also in bodies. To later generations, the clothing that human beings wear always looks weird, inexplicable, if not irrational; so do many customs, habits, beliefs, presuppositions. But bodies do not change or vary all that much. Neither do hopes, fears, anxieties, joy, and the imagination. We still read the Upanishads, Hesiod and the authors of the Old Testament with human comprehension.

Are those fundamental questions of anthropology then nothing more than a matter of perspective or personal preference in perceiving either the body or the clothes, either human nature or human conventions?

4. HUMAN UNIVERSALS AND THE DIVERSITY OF CULTURES: ON NATURE AND CONVENTION

The question of *translation between cultures* or societies concerns the means by which, say, we "Westerners" or "moderns" may understand "them", those "other cultures"; how we 'translate' their phenomena into our categories and concepts and how that understanding in turn acts upon our own understanding of ourselves. According to Donald Davidson, (cf. DAVIDSON, 1980) for instance, this sort of translation of cultures is possible, because we can and must presuppose a base of agreement between cultures: first, a bridge-head of commonly shared standards of truth, and inference, and, second, a commonly shared core of beliefs and experiences which the application of these standards renders meaningful. To a large extent, our common world of beliefs and everyday-experiences are connected with life, happiness, suffering and death. Also, the instrumental value of knowledge - knowledge understood here as the application of our standards of truth and checking against real life - is based on intrinsic value judgements which are bound up with the human condition. Though the forms of the instrumental value of knowledge may vary, they indicate something invariable. As Alfred Stern states:

> The evaluation of what constitutes an appropriate means for carrying out the project of living is variable; it is historically and socially conditioned. Conversely, the values which form the basis of this common project to face the human condition - that is the positive

> value ascribed to life and health and the negative value ascribed to suffering and death - are timeless, invariable, suprahistorical, trans-social, for they originate in the common and invariable human condition, face to face with life and death. (STERN, 1962, p. 200)

These values are found to be truly universal in the sense that they are independent of the individual peculiarities of the evaluating subjects and independent of the collective peculiarities of the evaluating groups. Thus, they are also found to be independent of civilizations and their historical and social variations. (STERN, 1962, p. 200)

Opinions of this kind are strongly supported by reports which seem to be rooted, at first sight, in the metaphysical conviction of the "one world" generated by modern science. Let me take an exemplary report, which demonstrates a specific understanding of comparative and translation problems anthropologists are facing, from Stanley J. Tambiah's *Henry Morgan Lectures 1984*:

> In Sri Lanka or in South India in the past smallpox was experienced as a sudden epidemic, and villagers attributed its occurrence to the anger of a named mother goddess (Pattini or Mariamma, *et al.*), because of moral lapses on the part of villagers. Annual festivals were held to appease the mother goddess, purify one's own moral lapses, etc. and thus keep the epidemic at bay. - After the Second World War Western medicine entered the scene and attributed the occurrence of smallpox to a germ theory of disease and managed to eradicate it by vaccination and regulate it by preventive action. (TAMBIAH, 1900, p. 132)

In this way, smallpox vaccination killed off the goddess of smallpox.

According to Tambiah, those two systems of thought and action are *incompatible* with each other, but because they occupy (to a significant degree) the *same space* - the cure or control of a disease that both Indian villagers and WHO experts can recognize as smallpox from its somatic manifestations - modern science was clearly seen to be more efficient, hence superior. Furthermore, both parties - villagers and Western experts - can agree to the same criteria - namely, an effective cure -, despite their incompatible explanatory theories. Thus, Tambiah continues,

> […] here we can say one set of practices (modern medicine treating epidemics) has posed a challenge to a different interlocutor (the traditional Indian system), not indeed in the language of the interlocutor, but in terms which the interlocutor could not ignore. In this case one can make a valid transcultural judgement of superiority in the treatment of smallpox in favour of Western medicine. The

> decisive evidence is that the cult of the smallpox goddess may die out, and indeed, has in these parts (though rituals to her of other kinds addressing other issues may continue). (TAMBIAH, 1900, p. 133)

The point of this example is, as Tambiah explains, that transcultural judgements of a very *specific* kind can be made, even of seemingly incompatible activities, provided they occupy at least in part the same *referential space*, and their claims can be put to the test. Obviously, the universalistic claim that there can be only a "single" or "unified science" pertains to such inquiries as mathematics, physics, medical biochemistry, genetics, molecular biology, and so on, where all practitioners of a discipline in question share concepts, rules of the game, notions of relevant evidence and proof. Researches in these fields strive for unified consistent theories which are in principle correct, for the time being. The assertion, however, that there can only be a "single science", exemplified by the disciplines just mentioned, which pertain to a "single world", does not logically rule out the possibility of the same single world possessing other provinces of "meaning", i. e. a specific cultural relevance of interrelated elements forming another "reality" within that world. Thus, the religious, moral or aesthetic connotations particular elements gained are not, ontologically speaking, located outside the scope of the single world, but, methodologically speaking, outside the scope of the single science, and they are capable of being understood in terms of other "frameworks". So, as Tambiah says,

> […] there are other domains of life, and frames of thought and action, especially the arts and crafts, music, dance, cuisine, ritual performance etc., that lie outside the provenance of mathematico-logical and scientific skills, and their distribution seems to have little integral connection with the level of achievement in science. (TAMBIAH, 1900, p. 113)

In view of these facts, to evoke the "human condition" is not the best way to try and reduce the complexity of life. For one could maintain that, say, our literary or aesthetic as well as our moral or religious systems address certain universal existential issues and human constraints, and yet hold that the systems in question are in important respects *different*, namely, in their commitments, emphases, and in this sense they are meaningful and acceptable, each in its own cultural place and within its historical time.

The problem of commensurability of cultures and making transcultural judgements faces its biggest obstacles when it attempts to compare and evaluate different systems of morality. Thoughts and suggestions put forward by Stuart

Hampshire in his book *Morality and Conflict* (HAMPSHIRE, 1983) can be said to bear on this discussion of why the impact of Western theory of values on so-called Third World societies produces such complex reactions. These may also be taken as statements on the limits of human rationality with regard to the choice and justification of ethical and aesthetical systems. Hampshire's critical stance is built around a set of basic tensions and dualities: first, between the *rational* and articulate side of morality and the less than rational, the historically conditioned and *affectively* charged side; second, between the "natural" species-wide *universality* of moral requirements and the "conventional", historically conditioned *particularity* of diverse moral systems. Hampshire, in working through the implications and ramifications outcomes of these tensions, concedes that *some* moral injunctions and prohibitions can be explained and justified "by reference to unvarying dispositions and needs of human beings, living anywhere in any normal society: for example, the requirement not to cause suffering when this can be avoided". (HAMPSHIRE, 1983, p. 143)

One may understand Hampshire as saying that particular customs may be criticized and faulted if they produce excessive pain or shocking, that is, if they violate standards of fairness and justice which at the present time are universally sustained. This, however is a limiting judgement - rather than a maximal notion; one that indicates what we want to be relieved from, which applies to such things as indiscriminate murder, child abuse, torture and so on.

The rejection of common moral or cultural relativism, however, does not necessarily require one to embrace a new moral or cultural absolutism, which, in an equally indiscriminate way, declares on alleged a priori reasons that all societies and cultures in their diversity are parts of an encompassing single world system grounded in the all-embracing "human condition". The human condition must not be understood as something of a yardstick within a universal paradigm of moral or cultural "rationality". Accordingly, Stuart Hampshire's main arguments are devoted to establishing that one definitive list of essential moral values and virtues, deducible from the "human condition", cannot be drawn up. He insists upon the logically as well as empirically well-established fact that any human species-wide contraints or requirements are compatible with many different conceptions of the good life. He argues therefore against a general ethical theory which implies, first, "that moral judgements are ultimately to be justified by reference to some feature of human beings which is common throughout the species", and, second, "that a morally competent and clear-headed person has in principle the means to resolve all moral problems as they present themselves." (HAMPSHIRE, 1983, p. 144)

Hampshire would admit that it is meaningful to refer to certain fundamental existential problems and fundamental anxieties faced by all mankind, such as the consciousness of the possibility of death and having to cope with that finality in terms of after-death beliefs and mortuary rites and cults of the dead. However, both

Hampshire and Tambiah (who follows his steps) wish to stress that even mortuary rites and cults of the dead show that

> […] mankind's cultural constructions have been so profusely rich and varied that we are well advised to be circumspect about the prospect of isolating worthwile generalities beyond the superficial. (TAMBIAH, 1900, p. 114)

Furthermore, history and anthropology show that the natural constraints imposed, for instance, by the common sexual and reproductive needs of the human species still allow for a wide area of diversity:

> […] diversity in sexual customs, in family and kinship structures, in admired virtues appropriate to different ages and to the two sexes, in relations between social classes [...] and in attitudes to youth and old age. (HAMPSHIRE, 1983, p. 141)

So the universal species-wide requirements, derived from the basic human condition, from human needs or necessities are very *unspecific*, since they are very general restraints or constraints which are compatible with many different mores, customs, and conceptions of the good life; in short, the basic "human condition", like "human nature", conceived in terms of common human limitations and capacities, always *underdetermines* a way of life. Moreover, according to Hampshire, the recognition of reflexivity in human beings opens up a duality between *nature* and *convention*:

> […] between moral requirements of utility and justice, and moral requirements that are based on specific loyalties and on conventions and customs of love and friendship and family loyalty, historically explicable conventions. (HAMPSHIRE, 1983, p. 165)

Hampshire warns that these considerations of the interconnectedness of practices and their rootedness in conventional soil (which often serves to justify them) may raise moral issues which have no straightforward solution. According to Tambiah, who comments on Hampshire's suggestions,

> […] these cautions should be borne in mind when social scientists try to understand the attitudes of Muslims to the veiling of their women, of Hindus to the sacrifice of animals to Durga, of fundamentalist Mormons to polygyny, and so on. (TAMBIAH, 1900, p. 139)

Indeed, we should resist the temptation to impose criteria of taste or convention as if they were rational axioms of human nature, upon a foreign culture. To confound such different levels of argument would mean not only a kind of category mistake: it often was the more or less hidden presupposition of cultural imperialism.

One clarification which I should like to make, therefore, as I begin to wind up my essay, is that the doctrine of a *common human condition* or *human universals* and the doctrine of the *diversity of cultures* are positions that do not contradict each other. Correspondingly, I declare myself to be neither an out-and-out *relativist* nor the opposite, an extreme anti-relativist, but a *relationist* - with convictions similar to those of philosophers and historians of early German historism, who never lost sight of the natural and social origins of our needs and interests that shape our value judgements, and not unlike some sociologists of knowledge like Max Scheler and Robert K. Merton. (cf. SCHELER, 1960; cf. MERTON, 1973, 1996)

FINAL REMARKS

A number of European and US-American historians and philosophers, mainly in the 1920s and the 1930s, urged us to eliminate from our thoughts all our own value-standards; they oscillated between the illusion of an intellectual history and an historiography which should be "independent" of the point of view of the author on the one hand, and an extreme ethnocentric stance, on the other hand. Oswald Spengler, for instance, at that time considered as equally valid the truths which had emerged in the course of history, in all civilizations:

> Für andere Menschen gibt es andere Wahrheiten. Für den Denker sind sie alle gültig oder keine. (SPENGLER, 1923, p. 33) - Other men and women have different truths. Thinkers must admit the validity of all or of none.

With Alfred Stern, I believe that Spengler's point of view is that of a quite artificial thinker. (STERN, 1962, p. 189-190) One cannot in every respect remain above the conflicts within cultures and between cultures; nor can one be untouched by the outstanding achievements and the failures and crimes of the millennia. Woe to the culture which does not believe in truths and values - neither in those universally shared between the cultures nor in those particular ones which have their evidence in culture-specific experiences and conventions! Such a culture never will create anything great; it will fall into a paralyzing scepticism. But there is no need for us to live without a belief in our own values and truths.

In a moving passage from his novel *Jean Barois*, the French writer Roger Martin du Gard expresses an idea and a sentiment to which I (for one) can subscribe entirely:

> Our manner of conceiving justice and truth is infallibly condemned to be surpassed by the coming ages. We know it. But far from discouraging us, this certitude, this hope, are the most efficient stimulants for our present impetus. The strict duty of every generation is, thus, to go as far as it can in the direction of truth, to the extreme limit of what it can see vaguely - and so stick to it desperately, *as if* it could claim to reach absolute truth. (MARTIN DU GARD apud STERN, 1962, p. 190)

One may call this a courageous and noble historism. In a quite similar manner, Joseph Schumpeter, who was friends with Max Weber, tried to keep his composure, in view of dangerous developments after the First World War and in the middle of the Second World War by confessing:

> To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian. (SCHUMPETER, 1992, p. 243)

I think we would be well advised to take the words of those eminent writers as seriously as they deserve to be taken.

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