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Sigurd N. Skirbekk:

An Inauthentic Understanding of Consciousness and Culture

A Naturalistic interpretation of Man

In the greater part of literature within the social sciences, "culture" is defined as social habits and a way of life, or as a pattern of all that is learned as opposed to that which is inborn.

This perspective makes it easy to explain culture as determined by external factors. A researcher of human culture can study relations between various "elements" and make models and theories about how "factors" are systematically determined. Such perspectives are certainly useful for many purposes; and not only for the study of small and stable societies. "Objective perspectives" may also be useful in understanding many forms of modern culture, where rigidity of thinking is often replaced by a rigidity of habit. We should nevertheless ask whether "objectifying" (or *gegenständliche*) perspectives can give us a basic understanding of a phenomenon as human culture, or for that matter of human consciousness.

There are methodological reasons in all sciences for focusing upon operational hallmarks, in order to communicate to others so that they can control what is being presented, and eventually contribute to cumulative explanations. Even non-scientific agents may have reasons for treating culture in this way. Among administrative personnel culture can be treated as a specific sector of performance and entertainment, more or less on the line of other sectors demanding public support.

This perspective on culture will, however, sooner or later appear superficial, at least if it leads to a missing of *the meaning* transmitted through cultural symbols. Meaning is not something immanent in an objective vehicle. It leads to an inauthentic understanding of culturally structured meaning if culture is just understood as a certain set of objective stimuli, created to expose different kinds of emotional experience in the heads of individual consumers. Meaning has a social aspect and is vital for the moral cohesion and diversity of every society, as well as vital for structuring of human consciousness.

Human consciousness is not just a state of mind or a psychological mechanism. Consciousness is *intentional* and conscious interpretations of reality are always related to cultural frames of meaning. Even what is intended to be value-free objectified understanding, depend upon frames of meaning.

This creates problems for programs of the so-called objective transmission of culture. The classical illustration of this problem can be found in Hegel's critique of liberal programs for a

supposed neutral and objective policy of religion. Within the framework of this program Christianity could be the topic for a transmission, while the real transmitted meaning became a mixture of scientism and liberal individualism. Hegel described the intrinsic problem in this program as the contradiction between proclaiming a non-substantial and all-inclusive understanding of religion and, at the same time, proclaiming religion as solely a private matter; the principle of privacy became substantial and could not be seen as a private question.

Other examples of inauthentic interpretations of culture, in the name of scientific neutrality, can be found in various psychological attempts to explain meaning and convictions as factors determined by psychological structure. Naturalistic psychologists have tried to explain rationally and pattern of meaning as if they were causally determined. Paradoxically enough, this has been done in the name of liberalism, a program for human liberation. The assumption has been that non-liberal attitudes could be explained as caused by certain non-desirable personality traits. An example of this can be found in the well-known study called *The Authoritarian Personality*.

The Authoritarian Personality

The book *The Authoritarian Personality*, written by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford, was published in 1950, that is in the post-war period. The subject of the book is psychic disposition for anti-Semitism, and what a democracy should be aware of, in order to prevent a repetition of the Nazi mentality in new disguises.

The general idea behind the book was an attempt to prove that racial prejudice is determined by certain psychic dispositions among those who bear prejudice, and that we should therefore be concerned about conscious and unconscious character traits in these people. The theoretical basis for the study is only implicitly revealed in the book, and yet it is possible to draw up some lines of reasoning. In the "Introduction" we could read:

The research to be reported in this volume was guided by the following major hypothesis: that the political, economic, and social convictions of an individual form a broad and coherent pattern, as if bound together by a "mentality" or "spirit," and that this pattern is an expression of deep lying trends in his personality.

The empirical part of the research was carried out as a large-scale interview with statements to which the subjects were to react. The statements were of this kind: "Jews seem to prefer the most luxurious, extravagant, and sensual way of living", "In order to maintain a nice residential neighbourhood, it is best to prevent Jews from living in it", "There are a few exceptions, but, in general, Jews are pretty much alike".

The content of these statements is that Jews have special characteristics that make them different from others, and that one should therefore keep them at a distance. Those questioned were to reply to each statement, saying whether they were in strong support of it, moderate support, agreed or disagreed, or felt a moderate or strong opposition to it. The answers were

given points from +3 to -3 and were added up for each person. We thus had a numerically operational definition of the degree of anti-Semitism for each person questioned

The degree of anti-Semitism was compared to a similar measure of "authoritarianism" in each personality. These statements were placed in a so-called F-scale for authoritarian attitude. "F" stood for Fascist-inclined.

In a statistical mass-comparison of the answers, the authors did find a correlation between people with high scores in anti-Semitism and people who had scored highest on the operational indicator of authoritarianism. This empirical finding should not be overlooked. When a rather primitive measuring instrument such as the F-scale gave systematic results, there are reasons to believe there must have been a good deal of magnetism in the field. The statistical correlations can however be interpreted in various ways.

The investigation did not limit itself to a conclusion of certain statistical correlation between an operational measure of anti-Semitism and the distribution of answers of the F-scale. On the basis of the presented data, the authors drew far-reaching conclusions as to what types of personality that a democracy should support and what types of personality should be opposed. These conclusions were based on a certain pattern of interpretation, taken for granted. We can find statements like this: "Since it will be granted that opinions, attitudes, and values depend upon human needs, and since personality is essentially an organization of needs, then personality may be regarded as a determinant of ideological preferences" (1950, p. 5). This purely philosophical precondition was based upon interpretations of human consciousness as an element in a psychological structure, a link in a bigger causal chain determining man.

Starting with this kind of theoretical framework, it might seem natural to imagine that all opinions that can lead to aggressive attitudes are determined by certain forms of psychological frustration. Cognitive views could be seen as determined by subconscious needs, such as the need to release, or giving an outlet for repressed aggression. When repression was strong, as it was supposed to be among people with certain philosophies of life, the need for a release of aggression, one way or the other, could be quite strong. A cognitive orientation, which demanded a continuous release of aggression, could lead to stereotype orientation, typical for authoritarian personalities.

The F-scale of authoritarian attitudes did take into account that there could be various ways of inhibiting aggression. The scale was therefor divided into several sub-groups. One kind of stereotyped cognition might correlate with a passive, conventional attitude. This attitude was supposed to give rise to rigid ideas about social ties and an uncritically submissive attitude toward established authority. Statements that were to reveal this attitude included the following: "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn", "Sciences such as chemistry, physics, and medicine have carried men very far, but there are many important things that can never possibly be understood by the human mind", "No sane, normal, and decent person should ever think of hurting a close friend or relative".

A different type of stereotyped cognition could be connected with an active, aggressive attitude, believing in the use of force and strength against defiance. This attitude was to be revealed by support for statements like these: "What the youth need most is strict discipline, rugged determination, and the will to work and fight for family and country", "An insult to

our honour should always be punished", "Homosexuals are hardly better than criminals and ought to be severely punished".

The authors did not presume that the statements were ambiguous in form, and that there might have been several possible reasons for supporting them. The answers were supposed to be given on the basis of emotional dispositions, determined by personality structure. These assumptions made it easy to judge non-liberal views as determined by unconscious need-distortion.

In social scientific circles, there has been much methodological criticism of *The Authoritarian Personality*. Christie and Jahoda's book *Studies in the Scope and Method of the Authoritarian Personality* is central in this debate. The methodological criticism of the book has not been very concerned about the philosophical implications in the interpretation of given correlations. Some were, however, concerned about the political use of the term "authoritarian", as if this was a kind of character only to be found among people with anti-Semitic attitudes, that is people labelled as right radicals.

The Open and Closed Mind

A later study, *The Open and Closed Mind* by Milton Rokeach, carried on the line of thought of *The Authoritarian Personality*, even if it was not so politically one-sided. Also Rokeach was convinced that cognitive ideas are determined by certain psychological types. His starting point was the common experience, that our cognition of the world represents a selected choice of all that is to be perceived, and that this choice is not fortuitous. Rokeach explains this by saying that each of us has a "belief"- and a "disbelief system"; things that we can believe in, classify and feel the truth of, and things that we exclude. The extent of what we want to register will vary from one person to another.

To explain why cognitive "openness" varies, Rokeach made use of the same neo-Freudian theories that we found in *The Authoritarian Personality*. The state of being cognitively "closed," also called "dogmatic," is a means of psychological defence. A neurotic person, defending himself against subconscious forces in him, will project his attitude of defence beyond himself, and thus see most of the world about him as threatening and dangerous. The more one defends oneself against reality, the less one will be able to recognise and master it, and the more one will depend upon various forms of authority. In order to select persons with a cognitively closed system, Rokeach asked people to divulge their reactions to a number of statements of an ethnocentric character.

The goal of *The Open and Closed Mind* was similar to that of *The Authoritarian Personality*, that is to diagnose potentially fascistic personality types and make them recognisable by means of non-political attitudes. However, Rokeach objected to *The Authoritarian Personality* in that this study only revealed extreme rightist authoritarians. Rokeach also used statements that could reveal extremists of the political left, so that even they could be diagnosed as authoritarian personalities.

Rokeach used figurative projective tests, both of the F-scale type and of his own making, in order to pick out people with an authoritarian and rigid bent. Here are some examples of the statements in his own so-called Dogmatic Scale: "It is better to be a dead hero than to be a

living coward" Agreement with this statement was interpreted as a need for martyrdom, which could be explained as a typical feature of a neurotic or authoritarian attitude. "My hardest battles are within myself" is another example that was supposed to reveal people with strong inner and subconscious conflicts. "In the history of mankind, there have probably been just a handful of really great thinkers". Agreement with this third statement was read as the expression of a positive authoritarian bent. Agreement with the statement, "There are a number of people I have come to hate because of things they stand for" was seen as the expression of a negative authoritarian attitude.

Purely statistically, Rokeach found a link between those who scored high on the scales for revealing closed cognitive systems, and those who scored high on the scales for authoritarian attitudes. This is in itself a fairly interesting discovery. However, there are many ways of explaining the empirical links found. The empirical data alone does not support the reasoning that brought forth the theories about the authoritarian anti-democratic personality type as opposed to a healthy, democratic and liberal type.

The Immanent Theory of Consciousness

Mass statistics have indicated empirical connections between anti-Semitic opinions and what has been called the authoritarian type of personality, and also between having an authoritarian type of personality and being cognitively closed.

The statistical connections have been constructed as causal connections. Man's conscious orientation has been seen as a later link in a causal chain of which the first links are determined by psychological factors. However, when the empirical connection is seen to affirm the fact that psychological forces determine man's cognitive orientation, one has to presuppose a specific theoretical frame of interpretation.

A result of the idea of a causal link between consciousness and a psychological state is that people with few democratic and liberal views will be understood according to their psychological bent. Another result of the same way of thinking is the idea that democratic people must be of a psychologically different type than undemocratic people. According to this theoretical framework, it must be inconceivable that people with an authoritarian streak may have serious democratic views. The conclusion will necessarily be that a democracy must aim at a special type of man with psychological features vastly different from those of the authoritarian personality.

An implicit principle for this kind of interpretations has been the assumption of "immanent consciousness". Consciousness is seen as an indwelling part of the empirically observable world. Several sections of *The Authoritarian Personality* show that this interpretation of consciousness has been taken for granted:

[...] since all ideologies, all philosophies, derive from non-rational sources there is no basis for saying that one has more merit than another. But the rational system of an objective and thoughtful man is not a thing apart from personality. Such a system is still motivated. What is distinguishing in its source is mainly the kind of personality organization from which it springs (1950, p.11)

This way of thinking is by no means limited to *The Authoritarian Personality* and the literature concerned with future ideal of mental health. The doctrine seems to recur, more or less explicitly, in many textbooks on psychology and empirical social research, compare the following statement from *Opinions and Personality* by Brewster Smith, Bruner, and White:

We have made much of the axiom that the total behavior of a person—including his opinions—reflects certain underlying regularities of functioning. It is this underlying regularity that lends predictability to behavior (1956, p. 26).

There may be several reasons for the widespread acceptance of this framework of interpretation. In the history of philosophy, the doctrine of immanent consciousness includes Feuerbach's materialism among its sources. Feuerbach taught that consciousness was just a quality of man. As for American social scientists, it has been widely accepted that interpretations according to a naturalistic philosophy are the scientific ones. A sociological view, ascribed to Durkheim, about our duty to interpret social phenomena "as things," has its parallel in naturalistic concepts of consciousness in psychology.

Once the conviction is reached that immanent empirical explanations of consciousness are scientific explanations, and that scientific explanations are true explanations, it almost naturally follows that objections to these explanations should be dismissed. It can hardly be of an impartial or rational kind. One does not ask whether a critique is right or wrong, one only seek for motives among its advocates.

The justification for "a diagnostic way of thinking" depends on the truth of the logical principles it is based on. One of these principles is, as we have seen, *immanentism*. The first question we should ask is therefore whether immanentism is valid as a logical principle.

An immanent interpretation of human conception of knowledge means that conscious knowledge is to be regarded as an empirical phenomenon on a par with other empirical phenomena. It is of lesser technical importance whether one chooses to explain consciousness according to psychological, or sociological, empirical data.

Logically speaking, this is a very problematic position: The assumption that knowledge is an empirical phenomenon could be called A. Since this assumption expresses a general principle that is supposed to be valid for all kind of knowledge, it must also be valid for A. But if A is an empirical phenomenon, even A could be explained as an immanent part of those who held this position. Seen in this way, the assumption A is relative and cannot claim universal validity.

If we, on the other hand, make an exception for A, and say that immanent explanation of knowledge does not apply to this principle, we have made an exception to what A claims. We will then have to face the question of how to justify when immanentism is valid and when not. In any case, A cannot be seen as a principle of general validity.

However, even though immanentism cannot be held as a total principle for analysis of consciousness without dissolving itself, it could perhaps be valid occasionally, as a *partial* principle. It could perhaps seem reasonable to insist that many modes of human consciousness do form a kind of immanent part of the empirical context in which they appear. Or to put it differently: Many aspects of knowledge could be classified as an immanent part of the

empirical data in which they appear, granted that there exists another aspect of knowledge that is true and reliable.

A partial, immanent interpretation of knowledge could, for instance, cover the understanding of *other* people's perception; however, it could not at the same time be applied to the person who analyses, when he is judging the perception of others as founded immanently. If the analyst reckons that others have not risen above the immanent stage, as he himself has, then he must be able to produce the reasons for this distinction between himself and others. What is there about his own position as an analyst that makes his analysis of others true, while their diagnoses of him are merely to be considered as symptoms of their factual and empirical background?

The question of whether the doctrine of immanence can take the same analysis that it exposes others to, is a question of self-reference in a philosophical construction. For this reason, it is a gross misunderstanding to try to solve the problems by appealing to mutual tolerance with the assurance that, "my opinions are as determined by causality as yours." An assurance of this kind can only mean that one's revelations are a part of one's own empirical background, and are, therefore hardly to be taken seriously by people of a different background.