

Faye's Naturalistic Reconstruction of the Humanities

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ESSAY REVIEW**Faye's Naturalistic Reconstruction of the Humanities**

Jan Faye: *After Postmodernism. A Naturalistic Reconstruction of the Humanities*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2012, 224pp, US \$ 85 HB

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Although philosophy of the natural sciences and philosophy of the social sciences are established disciplines, analytic philosophy of science has not extended its reach to the humanities. This is quite surprising considering the fact that disciplines like archaeology, classics, history, philology etc. are supposed to be an integral part of any modern university. Faye states that a reason for this lacuna is that continental philosophy long ago stole the discipline of the philosophy of the humanities by claiming that there is an essential ontological distinction between the objects studied by the natural sciences and those studied by the humanities. This claim has been accompanied by the further claim that methods used to investigate nature had to be different from those used to understand culture and meaning. *After Postmodernism* is designed to provide a philosophy of the humanities in the analytic tradition. Its scope is both critical and constructive: it is supposed to show the errors of postmodernism and to develop neomodernism, a new approach to humanistic science.

I

The critique of postmodernism, scattered throughout different parts of the book, aims to show the weaknesses of the positions usually included under this umbrella. In a rather polemical tone Faye diagnoses a devastating impact that postmodern movements have had on the efforts to develop the human sciences into a cognitive enterprise (p. 18). “So what postmodernists have in common is a mistrust of the supremacy of reason and the empirical foundation of

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science and thereby excluding the possibility of scientific knowledge in the humanities as well as the natural sciences. Their view is that all human experience is so infected by subjectivity that the appeal to an alleged empirical foundation can never justify the claimed objectivity of theory choice in the natural science – much less in the humanities. Beliefs and opinions cannot be turned into rationally defensible knowledge that the researcher can share with others” (p.177).

The old dualism between the realm of nature and the realm of mind propagated by Dilthey and the claim to the autonomy of the *Geisteswissenschaften* has been relatively harmless compared to the questionable phenomenological foundation that Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer later gave hermeneutics. The result was that it was no longer possible to make a clear distinction between subject and object, and therefore between epistemology and ontology, something which has paved the way to radical movements such as Derrida’s deconstructivism and Bruno Latour’s social constructivism. The distinction between a world as it exists and the cognition of it by human beings has not only been blurred, but fundamentally questioned. As Faye observes “[...] postmodernism did not insist on a dualist distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities along the lines of the view of the older defenders of the autonomy of the *Geisteswissenschaften* that culture belongs to the realm of thought and freedom, whereas nature belongs to the realm of extension and necessity. Rather, as pure linguisticians, postmodernists attacked the objectivity of the natural sciences head on, claiming that nature is a social and linguistic construction as much as culture is, and that the methods of the natural sciences are no more objective than the methods of palm-reading” (p. 199f.).

Faye defines “linguisticism” the view that the language user cannot transcend language and that his words never have a literal meaning that refers to something outside language itself. A “linguisticist” is, thus, someone who claims that all words of a language get their meaning internally without reference to anything external to that language. Faye’s main criticism of postmodernism can, thus, be summarized as charging it with “linguisticism,” the successor to idealism, whereby reality is a construction out of language instead of ideas (p.191). Although postmodern thinkers usually reject idealism, their extravagant position of the ubiquity and omnipotence of language amounts in the end to a new form of idealism, albeit wherein the self-referring mind has been replaced by a self-referring language.

II

Although Faye`s critique of postmodernism is valuable in itself, his arguments are hardly novel. However, the constructive passages of the book and his position of neomodernism formulate views that are not well known and deserve more attention. The starting point is the correct diagnosis of the prevailing situation: the somehow exclusive mission that the humanities were supposed to serve as those disciplines that could uniquely provide us an understanding of human beings has been called into question. In the last decades “man is no longer solely an object for human sciences, since biology, medicine, and neuroscience on the one hand, and social sciences as sociology and anthropology on the other, are each working on a completely different understanding of human life. [...] Natural sciences, in terms of neurology and cognitive sciences, are becoming better than the humanities at explaining human cognitive and linguistic abilities in terms of the brain`s physical-chemical features and seeing these skills as a result of man`s biological ancestry. A human being is in this perspective only a sophisticated biological machine. Conversely, the social sciences attempt to define man as a social creature whose knowledge, actions, and cultures must be understood by reference to the social communities in which they occur. [...] This dual pressure from biology and sociology leaves the human sciences in a no man`s land where their particular role as a positive science seems to be in liquidation. Humanistic research can hardly maintain a specific focus on items whose methods of understanding exile it from other kinds of research, and its subject matters seems just as slowly disappearing between the figures of traditional humanistic disciplines” (p. 23).

What is the alternative? The alternative is the naturalization of the humanities. Such a naturalization project can take different forms. I myself have worked out a methodological naturalism that allows for a great diversity of research techniques and research styles across disciplines and acknowledges the different structure of the object areas (*Naturalistic Hermeneutics*, Cambridge University Press, 2005). But my position is a purely methodological one, based on the demonstration of how materials that are “meaningful”, more specifically human actions and texts, can be adequately dealt with by the hypothetico-deductive method. However, Faye`s naturalism also involves ontological commitments. Insofar it is not minimalistic. On the contrary, it is a much more encompassing naturalistic position. Unfortunately it is not convincing.

Faye proceeds in a rather apodictic manner without providing arguments to claims that consciousness, language and culture have originated in a purely natural process and are thus part of nature; or that consciousness is in its stock form material, albeit very complicated, etc. These are huge claims, hard to be accepted by those not already convinced. And mere expressions of faith in the naturalistic program are not sufficient: “Of course, there are still problems that have not yet found their solution, for example, explaining phenomena such as sensory qualia, consciousness, and intentionality purely in terms of physiological processes selected by natural evolution. *But it is probably only a matter of time before we have a satisfactory explanation of these properties*” (p. 35). Or: “But, if it should prove – *something I believe will happen* – that a form of identity theory ultimately provides the best explanation of the experiments of brain scientists, an attempt at rescuing metaphysical dualism would be quite superfluous as far as human beings are concerned” (ibid.).

On the other hand, Faye pleads for the position that human science is not brain science. In this sense he opposes a full blown naturalism. Human sciences begin where biology ends. “Neither evolutionary biology nor neuroscience can explain the particular content of human thinking, human conduct, and the particular product of human actions. The human sciences work with those features of human thinking, behaviour, and expression, which are contingent to our biological and evolutionary nature, and which can only be explained in terms of meaning and human intentions.” (p. 43). What the position seems to amount to is, thus, a very weak ontological naturalism, accompanied with the clear prescription that all the explanations in the human sciences be formulated in the specific vocabulary of meaning and intentions. Such a weak ontological naturalism is harmless in the end: it stops in the formulation of the platitude that human beings are part of nature. This is a step forward vis a vis the old-fashioned dualistic position, but it does not provide a real pillar for a naturalistic reconstruction of the humanities. Human science is not brain science, and in the end it is the intentionalistic vocabulary that is supposed to carry such a reconstruction: human science is the science of intentions. Does this not sound very similar to Franz Brentano or Wilhelm Dilthey, reformulated against the background of modern debates?

The claim that the only acceptable system of description in the human sciences should be the one in terms of intentions and meanings seems to be unduly constraining. Why should we exclude other systems of descriptions, other means of representation of the phenomena under study? Faye suggests that one can somehow nicely delimit the domain of humanities as the

bundle of disciplines dealing with intentions. However, it is unclear how it should be possible to delineate the domain of intentions within a framework that honours naturalistic ontological commitments. Do neurology and cognitive science study another kind of human reality than the humanities or not? If it is the same reality that they are studying, then there is no reason to erect an a priori barrier between them and the humanities by prescribing that the descriptive system of the humanities must be one of intentions and meanings. This should be rather counterproductive really, since it unnecessarily excludes the possibility of interdisciplinary research at the intersection of the natural, the social and the humanistic sciences. If they study a different kind of human reality, then one departs from an ontological naturalism and this is inconsistent with the position of Faye. So, the attempt to neatly delineate a domain reserved for the humanities, the domain of intentions, seems to lead to unnecessary inconsistencies and to make the abandonment of the old dualistic tradition a very difficult enterprise.

The alternative is to start with problems and to formulate propositions aimed at solving problems. In accord with this approach, the scientific work begins with a problem, which can originate in any object area, and it consists in formulating problem solutions and subjecting them to critical testing. This position avoids the ontological commitments of the type that Faye makes, is open with respect to the descriptive system to be adopted in order to solve the problems at hand and allows for any kind of interdisciplinary research, depending on the problem situation and its development over time.

Although the ontological naturalism in the form that Faye has proposed is problematic, the methodological stance that he takes is much more promising. He endorses a pragmatic theory of explanation and claims that both explanations and interpretations create clarity and understanding in the natural sciences as well as in the human sciences. Understanding is the overarching concept because both explanation and interpretation express forms of understanding. A dominating form of explanation in the so-called interpretive disciplines, which are a subcategory of the human sciences, is the employment of what he calls *interpretive explanations*. Such explanations are responses to 'why' questions in contexts where what needs explaining is the occurrence of a sign, an action, a text, or a work of art, through its identification as the expression of a particular meaning. "An interpretive explanation describes the representational role of a certain sign, symbol, text, work of art, or action. It does so in virtue of a plea to the intended effect of a particular phenomenon by

regarding it as the expression of a particular symbolic, linguistic, literary or artistic meaning” (p. 79).

Besides these specific kinds of explanations prevalent in the humanities, Faye argues for a characterization of interpretation as an appropriate answer to a question that addresses a particular exigency concerning the representational function of some phenomenon. In a quite radical move, Faye argues to view interpretation as an explanation that addresses a representational problem. He maintains that interpretation, taken as an act of communication, is a particular sort of explanation in which the interpreter tells the interpretee a representational story in response to his or her queries which signals the existence of a particular exigency. He distinguishes between the formal side and the factual side of an interpretation. “The formal side of interpretation consists of some information that brings together a phenomenon X whose representational function is ill-understood and another phenomenon Y, such that the existence of Y is assumed to be the object of X’s representation or the object of which X is regarded as evidence. Thereby the interpretation makes the interpreted phenomenon X meaningful by establishing a representational function between otherwise well-understood phenomena. For instance, by asking “What does X mean?” or “What is X evidence for?” I know already that X exists but I do not know what X represents, signifies or stands for. My suggestion, or somebody else’s suggestion, is that this particular X represents Y. The proposal explains the meaning of X in terms of its representational (or evidential) connection with Y. Thus, interpretation is concerned not only with Y but also with the particular relationship between X and Y, where the *interpretans* (the information making the interpretandum meaningful) is meant to increase the interpreter’s understanding of the *interpretandum* (the object of interpretation). The meaning of X is first obvious to the interpreter when she is capable of understanding the representational function in connection with her former experience and background knowledge. The factual content of the interpretation, and therefore the nature of the exigency, is determined by what the interpreter believes may put new light on what she does not comprehend at all or not so well. Her selection of the *interpretans* is dependent on her beliefs about the *interpretandum* and the way she grasps the nature of the exigency.” (p.89f.)

This approach to interpretation is of pragmatic nature and is based on two interlinked ideas. The first notion is straightforward and is the main thrust of the argument in all pragmatic approaches: interpretation is (like explanation) highly contextual. The demand for an

interpretation and the result of the interpreting process depend decisively on the context. The second idea is an empirical one: we tend to interpret only what is not immediately obvious to us. It simply is not the case that we get engaged in an interpretation every time we come across a text or some other meaningful material.

As we know from cognitive psychology, linguistic understanding is a complex skill and there are a few levels playing a role in understanding language: the phonologic, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic levels. People gain experience over time at all those levels, so that sounds, words, sentences and entire texts are automatically classified and therefore language processing under standard conditions takes place effortlessly. This complex skill gets routinized over time, so that we normally understand texts automatically without conscious effort. It is only when a difficulty arises in the language comprehension process and if one does not understand a linguistic expression immediately, that cognitive resources for solving the problem are activated. Faye's approach to interpretation explicitly acknowledges this and builds, thus, on solid findings of cognitive psychology, a very promising strategy for a naturalistic methodology of interpretation.

The problem of interpretation in the humanities must be treated in the light of the fact that it just is not the case that interpretation is constantly required – despite what many postmodern philosophers claim. Interpretation becomes necessary only when the researcher cannot immediately extract meaning from the material that he is confronted with. Only then are cognitive resources in the form of attention activated in order to consciously interpret an expression or a longer text. Building on this insight, Faye proceeds by adopting the position of Hirsch and Føllesdal: text interpretation can be certainly pursued as a scientific activity aiming at producing objective results. This scientific activity unfolds largely in the form of formulating interpretive hypotheses about the textual meaning and testing them. Faye rejects the radical claim of the complete semantic autonomy of the text in favour of a moderate view that inquires into the author's intention behind the text but honours at the same time the obvious fact that any author must use a vocabulary shared by other members of a linguistic community. He acknowledges that language is a very complex intentional system based on the acceptance of certain norms and rules of a community of users, but insists that a particular "text" is a text only because it was intended to mean something by the author (p.125).

An argument that interpretation can be objective is the bedrock of his position, which is intended to show that the humanities can be transformed into humanistic sciences. Though he provides hardly any novel arguments that go beyond the classic ones included in Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 1967), the elaboration of the image of scholars in the humanities proposing interpretive hypotheses and testing them using data that emerges is still very refreshing. This is even more the case considering the flood of publications crystallizing the orthodox propaganda of the alleged death of the author – expressed by obviously living authors.

Faye's neomodernism with its emphasis on naturalistic and pragmatic considerations is a step into the right direction. Abandoning the humanities in the anarchic world of "anything goes" is not the right strategy for an analytic philosophy of science, and Faye has shown one way to claim back the philosophy of humanities from the occupation of postmodernism. Though neomodernism might not have reached its maturity yet, it is an overall laudable enterprise.