



CESC 2013

Self Reflexivity. The Ultimate End of Knowledge

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Abstract

In the history of modern knowledge one could notice the analogies that exist between the paths and the resolutions of any major forms of non-dogmatic enquiry which attempted to provide a comprehensive explanation and understanding of the Human Being and the Universe. The investigation in the Natural Sciences established the cornerstone of objectivity as its guiding principle. From the beginning, it has looked downward for the most solid foundation in objects and ended up finding the human consciousness reflected by the very core of quantum reality, the (self-)reflexivity of human consciousness in quantum reality. In the Social and Psychological Sciences, the (self-)reflexivity of a particular knowledge (theory/matter) over the knowledge that produced it (discipline itself/researcher) forms the main epistemological and methodological debate over the meaning and the condition of possibility for the scientific objectivity in the field. Modern Philosophy started with the methodical doubt from the Cartesian Meditations, advanced through a transcendental perspective and ended in the pure self-reflexivity of the phenomenological consciousness. Even if the unavoidable conclusion is that Self-reflexivity has proved to be the closing stage of any mature reflective mode of knowledge – whether it was natural, social or psychological science, philosophical or literary – the key question is ‘Why?’

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Peer review under the responsibility of the West University of Timisoara.

Keywords: (self-)reflexivity; (self)consciousness, (self-)knowledge, evolution of knowledge/science

1. Introduction

In the modern, world scientific knowledge has replaced the philosophical, religious or traditional knowledge as primacy, explanatory power and influence. Nowadays, regardless its religious believes, family inheritance, cultural particularities ones takes his economic, politic, and administrative, technical decisions mostly on the basis of scientifically acquired and validated information. As the foundation of scientific inquiry is the empirical validation of theoretical assumption, the Theory, in its broader sense, comes to shape our understanding. “Theories structure our world. Theories are our world. Theory is not just something practiced in the academy by a collection of

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«specialists». We see our theories everywhere. We *are* our theories.” (Gamez, 2007, p. 1) But often at the base of these scientific theories lies some dogmatic, mythological presuppositions. People endow theories with trust and confidence, but foundations of theories are not always as scientific as it seems. The theory of theory has no foundation. And this is where the self-reflexivity issue comes to the fore.

The reflexivity is a one of the most conceptualized term in the philosophy of social sciences, and yet one of the less used in daily academic writings and practice. Its meaning covers the entire area from reflection, self-reference, to self-reflectiveness and is often conflated with self-reflexivity. In their turn these terms are intimately related to being conscious, consciousness, self-consciousness, reflexive self-consciousness. Its complexity results from its different interdisciplinary meanings. As a quality, in logical (mathematical) sense, the term reflexive implies a relation that always holds between a term and itself. In linguistic sense, the reflexive denotes the quality of referring back to the subject of the clause in which it is used. As a method or theory characteristic in social sciences, reflexivity implies “taking account of itself or of the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on what is being investigated.” (Hobson, 2004, p. 364). The reflexive means the object reflects the qualities of the subject or the subject is reflected in or by the object. In logical sense, the reflexivity refers to a relation in which each term points to the other, while in self-reflexivity the object and subject become one. In linguistic sense, self-reflexivity emphasizes on self-referential and self-endowing potential, while in methodological sense it evokes the awareness of the observer-expectancy effect (also called the experimenter-expectancy effect, expectancy bias, observer effect, or experimenter effect). In philosophy, self-reflexivity represents the ontological foundation of all existence as it is within the Hegelian philosophy of absolute idealism, in which the rationality reflects the open-ended historical process of self-development of reality itself.

Within the philosophy of science (self-)reflexivity present multifaceted as well. It is considered as an *attribute of the theory*, a *characteristic of its author(s)*, a quality of the *process of research*, or a *feature of the subjects* of research.

In the context of epistemological perspective, self-reflective concern the relation of theory with its author. It is an activity of finding or abstracting something about itself (about feelings, thoughts, and actions) but without producing them. As a process, *reflexivity* implies activity where by the act self-consciousness is determined or posited. Self-Reflexivity is a superior form of self-activity in which the self-consciousness is produced, and it is sustained any form of self-consciousness. Self-reflection, self-reference, and self-reflectiveness are prerequisites for the individual self-consciousness of the author which finds him/herself within its own theory, s(he) finds him/herself thought by him/herself (up to the phenomenological level of thought thinking itself as a thinking).

As a characteristic of the author, reflexivity is conceived as an attribute of the *personal* relation with what is under scrutiny. The researcher should interact and react while he/she observes and reflects on his/her object. He/she studies following some pre-tested working hypothesis, theoretical constructs, hunches and stereotypes. His/her understanding was built on and carries with him/her cultural inheritance with all its positives and negatives. Reflexivity is “a self-awareness and an awareness of the relationship between the investigator and the research environment.” (Lamb & Huttlinger, 1989, p. 766) In relation to the researcher, (self-)reflexivity denotes both self-reflection and introspection: the fact that the author, when he/she think or study, is aware about he/she existence and influence on the object, about its own subjectivity.

However, reflexivity is not limited to the analytic attention upon the researcher’s role and influence in research (Gouldner, 1971), but it also covers the turning back upon his/her socially constructed experience (in research). In qualitative research, both the research process and the researcher’s position are open to an on-going process of self-critique and self-appraisal (Koch & Harrington, 1998, pp. 882-890).

As a *process* self-reflection is to reflect upon the act of knowledge, while reflexive is a stance, it is the ability to evaluate the influence of oneself within the very act of knowing (research). Although they are not mutually exclusive, the reflexivity stance is more complex and could support the reflective process (Fook, 1999). If the researcher is not self-reflective he/she is will do the research without knowing what he want to discover or understand. In other words, one can be reflective without being reflexive. That is, one can become self-conscious without being conscious of that self-consciousness (Babcock, 1977).

In social and human sciences the reflexivity is also *related with the object*. The analyzed subjects react to the presence of the researcher who becomes part of their world and they behave accordingly. But the research situation

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