
DO THE HUMAN SCIENCE HAVE A SINGLE METHODOLOGY?

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Abstract

Despite all serious critiques regarding the appropriateness and sufficiency of empirical methodology in the human sciences, it has secured its place in such researches. Critiques of empiricism in the human sciences take advantage of a variety of strategies to disqualify it and to establish their alternatives. It seems that one key issue which is forgotten or overlooked by these critiques is looking into the nature of the subject matters of the human sciences and their methodological requisites, which can shed some light on the deficiency of empirical methodology in the realm of the human sciences. This article will start with the methodological principle that the appropriate method for studying any subject depends on the nature of its subject matter, which in turn, determines the appropriate research method. On this basis, I will try to analyze the nature of the themes in the human sciences to show the incongruity of empirical method with such concepts. Analyzing such concepts, shows that they represent a variety of conceptual categories such as first intelligibles, secondary philosophical intelligibles, and purely conventional concepts, and to study each one of them, one needs to employ a different methodology. Therefore, the article concludes that empirical method has its limited privileges in studying some of the issues in the human sciences; however, we need to take a multidimensional approach regarding the methodology of the human sciences.

Keywords: *Social Science, Empiricism, Naturalism, Intelligible, Multidimensional Methodology.*

INTRODUCTION

The so-called “scientific invasion” of the human sciences by empiricism met a major resistance from some philosophers of the human sciences, including the romanticists, historicists, hermeneuticists, and critical realists (Ted Benton 1998). They believe that there is too much dissimilarity between human and natural phenomena to be studied and understood by the same methodology. However, in identifying why and how exactly they diverge, different anti-empiricist groups disagree. Historicists, for instance, look for such a diversity in the historical nature of the human phenomena, which (according to their understanding) renders human realities prone to temporal change without following a deterministic law similar to the laws of nature that govern mechanical or chemical realities.

Some Neo-Kantian, German philosophers, and hermeneuticists, such as Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915), Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936), and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), as avant-garde critics of empiricism in the field of human sciences, insist on the diversity in the “subjects and objectives” of the natural and human sciences which, they believe, are poles apart and lead to a diversity in their methodologies (Dilthey 1947). They maintain that the subject matter of the human sciences is “meaningful behavior”, and these sciences try to understand the meaning of specific behaviors instead of discovering general laws that determine their course (if there were such laws). They suggest that there is a radical difference between “explanation” as the proper goal of the natural sciences and “*verstehen*” as the suitable form of understanding for the human sciences, and they cannot be attained by the same methodology. They regard the generalization of empirical methodology to include the human and social sciences as baseless, as well as useless. Others such as Peter Winch (1926-1997) follow the linguistic turn and consider social phenomena a form of language game which could be studied by following *rules* instead of *laws* (P. Winch 1997).

As one can see, different anti-empiricist schools came to this point on the basis of diverse, and sometimes opposing, philosophical and epistemological backgrounds, and have come up with very different alternatives. What concerns us here is that one key issue, overlooked by the critiques of empiricism in the human sciences, is scrutinizing the nature of the subject matter of the human sciences and its methodological requisites, which can shed some light on the deficiency of empirical methodology in the realm of the human sciences. Both empiricists and their critiques suffer from the fundamental flaw of not being able to take into account the vast diversity of areas in different fields of the human sciences.

In this article, I will argue that the rational point of departure for deciding about the proper methodology for studying a topic lies in determining the nature of the subject under study. By looking into the subject matter of the human sciences, we understand that since the area under study by these sciences includes too many different subjects to be classified under one category, one has to look for “methodologies” proper for such categories, instead of one single methodology. To begin with, I have to explain some keywords.

Human sciences can be defined as systematic endeavors towards understanding, explanation, interpretation, evaluation, and managing of human actions and passions (from the standpoint of their being human phenomena). They include both descriptive and normative human sciences.

The appropriate method for studying a phenomenon is determined by the nature of the concept that signifies it. According to the classification of concepts in Islamic philosophy, universal concepts (intelligibles/*ma'qūlāt*) are divided into three categories: a) concepts of quiddity, pertaining to the whatness of things, such as the concept of “sun” and “white”, b) logical concepts, signifying mental concepts, such as the concept of “universal”, and c) philosophical concepts, indicating the existential features of an object, such as the

concepts of “cause” and “effect”. Each category requires, and in fact dictates, its proper methodology (M.T. Misbah Yazdi 1999).

In order to identify the right methodology for studying the subject matters of the human sciences, one has to analyze the logical traits of concepts referring to human actions and passions, and their methodological requisites. Here, I will restrict my discussion to descriptive human sciences, and leave normative human sciences to another study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Passions

Passion is used in psychology and in philosophy at least in two ways. By “passion”, here, I mean any human quality which is not a result of human creativity, but is the effect of human passivity towards external or internal factors. Passions are directly understood through knowledge by presence (*al-ilm al-Hudūri*) without the mediation of any concept. However, they are reflected in the mind as concepts, and understood through knowledge by representation (*al-ilm al-Huṣūli*). Attaining, understanding, and evaluating propositions, whose subject or predicate are made of concepts designating passions are in need of knowledge by presence. If someone finds no instance of a feeling inside oneself, one will have no idea about such a passion at all. Therefore, neither empirical, nor hermeneutic methodology is sufficient in such areas. This is true about concepts directly abstracted from passions.

However, there are concepts such as “happiness” and “grief”, designating human passions but cannot be understood unless they are compared with their opposites. Because of this feature, such subjects are understood in pairs of affirmative-negative concepts whose opposition is of the type “possession and privation” (*adam and malakah*) in which the subject’s aptitude is taken into consideration. On the other hand, such concepts are stratified and multi-leveled, and opposite concepts may apply to one instance from different aspects. Such concepts are

instances of philosophical concepts (or philosophical secondary intelligibles). The faculty of sensation and the empirical methodology are insufficient for, and even irrelevant to, comprehending the concepts of this sort of issues in the human sciences, and they should be understood through intellect ('aql).

Physicochemical and Physiological Effects of Passions

Human internal feelings and passions have physical effects on different bodily organs, such as changes in the level of hormones, nerve impulses, muscle and joint motions, and some consequences for the organism as a whole. There may be some levels of causality between such effects, so that one of them leads to the other. Some human sciences take these relations as their subjects of study. Discovering causal relations between subjective passions and their physical effects is not possible merely through empirical methodology, because one party in this relation (i.e. subjective feeling) is only accessible through knowledge by presence. Of course, the relation between different physical (or physiological) effects can be empirically determined. However, the discovery of such relations is not a problem for the human sciences; they rather belong in physiology as a branch of natural sciences. What prompts such questions to make their ways into the human sciences is their causal relation with subjective passions, and recognizing such relation is out of the scope of sensory experiments alone.

Objective Manifestations of Passions

Human subjective passions have objective manifestations. For instance, subjective happiness is objectively manifested in "smile". Smiling is an effect of happiness, and that subjective feeling is considered as a "preparing cause" (*al-'illat al-mu'idah*) for smile to appear on the face; that is, provided that other parts of the "complete cause" (*al-'illat al-tāmmah*) are there, such an effect will necessarily happen. Smile is an objective

manifestation of a subjective feeling, and this special relation between the two justifies the designation of the former for the latter.

If one observes the same effect (i.e. smiling) on another person's face, he ascribes the same feeling to that person through a process of analogy, and infers that: "if he is smiling, then he is happy." Such attribution of a subjective feeling to another person is a particular judgment and in need of arguments, requiring the employment of intellect. At a third stage, one draws a general causal relation between smile and happiness, disregarding any specific person, time, place, or any other condition. In this way, one tries to make a general law. In order to establish such a general law, one has to make a syllogism, whose major premise is rooted in knowledge by presence. As one can see, several types of knowledge and a number of methods are involved in understanding and explaining such passions.

Causes and Influential Factors on Human Passions

Part of the problems in the human sciences deals with what causes certain human passions or prevents them from happening. Such factors include a passion, leading to another one (as feeling failure leads to sadness), an action culminating in a feeling (as helping a needy person can excite happiness in the helper), and natural or social factors stimulating a passion (as shortage of sunlight in winter causes depression, or other's appreciation brings about self-confidence).

In the first case (i.e. when there is a causal relation between two passions) understanding each one of two passions, as well as understanding their causal relation, is only possible through knowledge by presence, and senses and experiment have nothing to do in this regard. But in the latter two cases, experiment can help in discovering the causal relation.

Linguistic Signs

Linguistic signs play an important role in the human sciences. Human beings employ language to convey their feelings, to communicate their expectations, and to influence each other mentally or practically.

One example of such influence can be found in sentences conveying orders. Human sciences employ linguistic expressions as one important means for penetrating into the mental world of people under study and for communicating with them. It has led some philosophers of human sciences to take language as a model for all subject matters of the human sciences, and look at hermeneutics as the only relevant methodology for studying them.

The relation between these words and their referents depend on linguistic agreements which are purely conventional. An awareness of such agreements and conventions is indispensable for understanding what a word indicates. One has to learn the meaning of words and the grammatical rules of a linguistic society, in order to decode the words and sentences, and to understand their meanings. Although sense perception has its role in hearing or seeing the words, experience has no room in the process of understanding the meaning of words.

Action as Meaningful Behavior

Another part of the subject matter of the human sciences is related to human actions such as: electing, assigning, representing, governing, possessing, exchanging, transferring, producing, distributing, consuming, judging, training, teaching, learning, marrying, believing, worshipping, sacrificing, cooperating, imitating, tolerating, abusing, isolating, uprising, transgressing, and so on. Critiques of empiricism in the human sciences take advantage of a variety of strategies to disqualify it and to establish their alternatives. It seems that one key issue which is forgotten or overlooked by these critiques is looking into the nature of the subject matters of the human sciences and their methodological requisites, which can shed some light on the deficiency of empirical methodology in the realm of the human sciences. On and so forth. When we look at such notions, we realize that such concepts do not convey specific movements; therefore, they are not primary intelligibles (concepts of quiddity). What makes such notions as subjects of study in the human sciences is the “titles” we give them. To use Wilhelm Dilthey’s (1833-1911) and Max Weber’s (1864-

1920) terminology, one may speak of “meaningful behavior” as the subject of study in human sciences. Weber calls this type of behavior as “action” and writes: “in ‘action’ is included all human behaviour when and in so far as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it” (Max Weber 1997). Of course, there is a debate over whether the source of meaning in behavior lies in the individual or society, but I am not going into this discussion here.

Analyzing such actions, one finds out that they all enjoy certain features:

1. First, they accompany awareness and volition, and are carried out for achieving a result and accomplishing an objective;
2. Secondly, their objectives bring about certain titles for actions, and one action may be prone to opposite titles in different situations. Such designations are the results of a subjective comparison between actions and the agent’s objectives.
3. Moreover, in different situations, various and even antagonistic designations can be ascribed to one action according to various aspects and situations.

All these qualities are features of philosophical concepts. Therefore, we may conclude that meaningful behavior cannot be studied and understood through pure empirical methodology, but rather, one has to pay attention to the source of abstracting their meanings and titles before one can understand them, and it needs rational and subjective deliberation. Of course, in cases that such titles depend on social agreements and conventions, one has to learn about relevant social and cultural conventions before understanding them, and in cases that they depend on the intention of the acting agent, one has to search for the mentality and motivation of the agent in order to realize the meaning of his/her actions. What is true in any case, however, is the fact that none of these processes are empirical in nature, and are not accessible through experiments.

Since there is a producing relation between the goal of an action and the title extracted from it, then the title can signify the goal, and convey it, as

an effect can designate its cause, and as a word communicates its meaning. In order to understand the meaning an action, one has to go through an interpretational process, like the process of interpreting a text. However, there is a big difference between the two which should not be neglected. The difference lies in the fact that the relation between words and their meanings is the product of human agreement and convention, while the meaning of actions and their designating titles sometimes depend on their real causal connection with their objectives, although sometimes their association to their meanings is the result of social conventions too.

The goal that is intended by an intentional act is called its “reason”. The reason for performing an action is its “final cause” or “causa intentionalis” (*al-illat al-ghāiyah*) which is one part of its complete cause. Therefore, the differentiation often cited in the social sciences between reason and cause is not accurate. What necessitates a volitional act, and provides the sufficient condition for its occurrence, is the addition of intention as the final part of the complete cause, which is in turn the result of conceiving of the goal by the agent. Very often, the titles extracted from human actions depend on such a reason, which fully depend on the subjective motivation and the intention of the agent. Thus, those who turn to social conventions for the meaning of behaviors, disregarding its relation to the agent’s intention, and consider it irrelevant to the human and social sciences, are wrong.

Effects of Meaningful Action

Beside physical and physiological effects, intentional actions sometimes have intended or non-intended effects on the agent or other people. The study, analysis, and explanation of such effects make a good part of the human sciences. These types of effects follow intentional actions, based on one’s understanding of the agent’s intention, and are often used in normative human sciences. Smiling to *encourage* a good deed is “appreciated”, while smiling to *ridicule* others is “prohibited”. For such effects to take effect, it is necessary to understand the concepts abstracted from, and ascribed to, them. If there is a misunderstanding regarding such

concepts, they may cause unintended and unpleasant results. They may also result in unpredictable reactions in an individual or a society as well.

These concepts are philosophical concepts, the understanding of which is out of the domain of empirical methodology; because they are abstracted by comparing behaviors with the intention of their agents as well as their effects, and without such a comparison and deliberation, they cannot be understood.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I tried to sift through different types of concepts used in the human sciences in order to determine proper methodologies for studying them. I used the typology of concepts by muslim logicians and philosophers as a basic framework. Accordingly, universal concepts used in the human sciences are either factual concepts or purely conventional ones. Purely conventional concepts are the result of human agreements, and to understand their meaning one has to employ interpretation method to discover about the social convention behind them. However, discovering the causal relation between such conventional concepts and their causes and effects is sometimes in need of employing empirical methodology. Factual concepts are either concepts of quiddity or philosophical concepts. Concepts of quiddity, used in the human sciences, are mostly (if not wholly) abstracted from knowledge by presence, and do not yield to empirical method. Philosophical concepts also have no direct relation to sense data and empirical methodology, though sometimes they benefit from experimentation to discover the causal relation between parties involved in the abstraction of such designations. We conclude that neither empiricism, nor hermeneutics, can be taken as the single methodology for the human sciences. The human sciences need a multidimensional methodology in order to cover all their subject matters, and to be competent for attaining their objectives.

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