

Intersubjective Metrology

Interpretive social scientists aim at uncovering the ways of thinking of human or non-human agents. Since Dilthey (1883, 1927), social hermeneutics distinguishes between familiar and uncanny human behavior. If a behavior is familiar, the inquirer can use her cultural background in order to decipher it. If a behavior is uncanny, the inquirer has to reconstitute first the agent's cultural background before being able to understand it. The social scientist then faces the problem of the appreciation of the distance between his cultural background and the agent's cultural background. We can call this problem the intersubjective difference measurement problem or intersubjective metrology problem (henceforth: IMP)

The problem is that, in order to appreciate the intersubjective difference, one has to compare the Other's mind with his own: therefore, understanding is a condition of measurement. But in order to reach an understanding of someone else, one has first to formulate a hypothesis about the intersubjective distance with her target. Therefore, the procedure is circular (Mantzavinos, 2005). In order to be scientific, social sciences should solve this problem. A social scientist has to avoid two opposite failures: egocentrism and 'mysterianism' (McGinn, 1993). The egocentrism and its variants (ethnocentrism, anthropomorphism, anachronism, machismo, etc.) is the systematic underestimation of the differences between oneself and the others. This mistake explains the misinterpretation: one projects his own cultural background on another subjectivity. Mysterianism is the claim that the two subjectivity are so distant that they are incommensurable (Quine, 1960 ; Nagel, 1974). If mysterianism is correct, a scientific inquiry is impossible. For this reason, it is rather a philosophical claim than a scientific mistake.

Mysterianism results from the desire to avoid egocentrism, and egocentrism results from the refusal of mysterianism. In order to avoid such a dichotomy, to build a scale is necessary. One of the reasons that social science has trouble to reach scientificity is that the appreciation of the intersubjective difference is subjective, in the sense that there is neither a conceptual agreement on a scale nor a standardized procedure to reach a judgment on that matter.

A solution to the IMP is suggested by the recent development of happiness economics (Frey & Stutzer, 2016). Rejecting the traditional view that the measurement of utilities can only be grounded on observable behavior (Robbins, 1932), happiness economics aims at providing a scale of subjective appreciation of happiness (Alexandrovna, 2016). It is reasonable to believe that, if it is possible to measure the distance between subjective degree of happiness, it provides a model for a more general endeavor: to measure the distance between subjective worldviews. The goal of my paper is to discuss the viability of this option.

References

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