

## Chapter 8: Historicism and Human Diversity

Perhaps the time is at hand when it will be comprehended again and again how little used to be sufficient to furnish the cornerstone for such sublime and unconditional philosophers' edifices as the dogmatists have built so far: any old popular superstition from time immemorial (like the soul superstition, which, in the form of the subject and ego superstition, has not even yet ceased to do mischief); some play on words, perhaps, a seduction by grammar, or an audacious generalization of some very narrow, very personal, very human, all too human, facts.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Preface)

It seemed to me that, for the moment, the essential task was to free the history of thought from ... transcendental narcissism.

—Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1982: 203)

Kant's lifetime saw a rise in the consciousness of human beings as historical beings. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had been a period of rejecting contingent, tradition-bound ideologies of the Middle Ages, but the Enlightenment alternative was not taken as just another tradition. Instead, Enlightenment philosophers saw themselves as replacing historical traditions with ahistorical truths grounded in reason and experience. Kant too aims to lay out necessary and universal transcendental structures of human thought and action, stripped free of anything merely historical. At the same time, however, Kant was attuned to human historicity; he even emphasized the historicity of Enlightenment itself (cf. Foucault 1984:32-50). Kant's students (Herder) and followers (Reinhold) further emphasized this point. By the time of Hegel and Marx, the idea that humans' fundamental ways of thinking about and acting within the world differ from culture to culture and change from one historical epoch to another had become commonplace. Today, this emphasis on human variety pervades disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and even parts of psychology and literary theory.

But the notion of "historicity" is ambiguous. In its most mundane sense, the claim that human beings are historical is one that (virtually) no one would deny. Humans age and change. We live in communities with varied and changing cultures. But historicism is generally not limited to this mundane historicity. In chapter six, we saw two importantly different sorts of historicism. One, represented by Hegel and Marx, emphasized the necessity of historical change. Other philosophers, such as Nietzsche, used historicity and diversity to emphasize the contingency of particular modes of thought and forms of life. For both sets of historicists, humans' historical nature is not limited to external studies of changing individuals and cultures. Over history and across cultures, human beings differ in how they see the world. In Kantian terms, *transcendental* anthropology is historicized and localized. Any transcendental analysis justifies only "the morality [or other norms] of their environment, their class, their church, the

spirit of their time, their climate and part of the world” (Nietzsche 1966:97). In the rest of this chapter, “historicism” refers to what we might call a “transcendental historicism” that treats humans’ from-within, normative perspectives as historically conditioned.

This historicism has become a mainstay of our world. In its most facile form, it manifests itself in trite relativisms that only refer to what is true-for-me or good-to-me. Such relativists generally think that diversity of human ways of thinking establishes that no particular perspective on the world can be right. Such relativism is often confused with tolerance, as though the most respectful stance to take towards different times and cultures is to recognize that their beliefs and values were true for them, just as one’s own beliefs and values are true for oneself. At the end of this chapter, I return to this simplistic but all-too-common relativism, but for the bulk of this chapter, I focus on three significant and more nuanced historicists.

I start with the rise of historicism regarding natural sciences, focusing on Thomas Kuhn, through whom the concepts of a “paradigm” and a “paradigm-shift” have become commonplace. Kuhn and post-Kuhnian philosophy of science is important because it seems to undermine not only strong scientific realism but even Kant’s own modest realism about natural science. If natural sciences are historically conditioned, it becomes hard to see how one can take Kantian categories of experience to have the strict universality or even talk about *the* empirical world. From Kuhn, I turn to Foucault. Like Kuhn, Foucault questions basic aspects of Kant’s transcendental framework, but Foucault focuses on the problematic and historically contingent notion of “the human being” as such. In particular, Foucault historicizes both the general framework of Kantian anthropology – what Foucault calls “man” as an “empirico-transcendental doublet” (Foucault 1970: 319) – and the conception of human agency underlying Kant’s moral theory. Finally, I turn to the contemporary discipline of cultural anthropology, where human diversity – rather than historicism as such – provides a perspective within which the supposed universality of Kant’s anthropology is questioned.

### *1. Historicism and Natural Science*

The roots of historicism in the natural sciences lay in mid-nineteenth century developments within mathematics. Mathematicians such as Lobachevsky, Poincare, and Reimann began thinking of basic geometrical axioms – such as that parallel lines never meet – not as intuitively obvious truths about space but as “conventions.” Mathematicians began exploring non-Euclidian geometries within which familiar geometrical claims – such as that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle is 180 degrees – no longer hold true. In itself, this development in mathematics was important since it suggested a human capacity to think about worlds with structures very different from our own. But Euclid’s axioms were still generally taken to define the true nature of space. Mathematicians might think about worlds where parallel lines touch, but were just mathematical fantasies.

Then Einstein argued that the world itself was non-Euclidean. Straight lines can cross themselves, parallel lines touch, and the interior angles of triangles are not 180 degrees. At the same time, other radical changes were happening in physical sciences. Quantum mechanics challenged basic notions such as the continuity of time, determinacy of space, and principle of causation. Within quantum mechanics, time no longer passes in a continual stream but in little

jumps, or quanta. Objects are not located in particular spaces but smeared out in waves of probability. And events in the world are not universally explicable in terms of causes and effects. Some things happen, literally, by chance. Euclid's space replaced by Einstein's, his deterministic world by rolls of the dice.

As philosophers increasingly sought to come to terms with these and similar developments in science, the Kantian model of science as built on a priori synthetic claims about any possible experience seemed increasingly implausible. In a classic paper (Quine 1951), W.V.O. Quine argued against the distinction between synthetic and analytic claims and the possibility of any knowledge that could not be changed in the light of experience. If Euclidean geometry could be abandoned for relativity theory and determinism for quantum mechanics, then "no statement is immune to revision"; any claim is open to empirical challenge, including "even ... logical law[s]" such as the law of the excluded middle or the principle of non-contradiction (Quine 1951:40). "The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges," such that while experience can lead to revisions in our web of belief, "No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole" (Quine 1951:40).

Quine's account of knowledge set the stage for Thomas Kuhn's historical turn in philosophy of science. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* rejected dominant models of scientific progress within which old illusions give rise to more and more accurate scientific theories and the scientific method measures hypotheses against empirical evidence, rejecting theories that fail to be confirmed. Against this conception of science, Kuhn argues both that the "scientific method" does not consist in the attempt to falsify hypotheses and the rejection of those that fail to measure up to empirical data and that "scientific revolutions" are not unambiguous forms of progress. Kuhn distinguishes between what he calls "normal science," "extraordinary science," and "scientific revolutions." Normal science, what most practicing scientists generally engage in, consists of "puzzle-solving." This science takes place within a "paradigm," a "constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given [scientific] community" (Kuhn 1996: 174) that supplies "a criterion for choosing problems that ... can be assumed to have solutions" (Kuhn 1996: 37). The paradigm resists falsification by empirical data. Scientists often are unable even to see data that contradicts the paradigm – the paradigm structures "the perceptual process itself" (Kuhn 1996: 62). Even if scientists perceive contradicting data, they initially interpret it in ways that preserve the paradigm itself. Finally, if they are unable to explain the troubling data, scientists generally move to other areas of research rather than reject theories. As Kuhn put it, "Paradigms are not corrigible by normal science at all" (Kuhn 1996: 122).

Sometimes, however, empirical findings that conflict with scientific paradigms – "anomalies" – are sufficiently disturbing to provoke "extraordinary science," examining the anomaly in greater detail and seeking to explain it within the broad contours of one's paradigm. Generally, anomalies are resolved with only slight changes to the dominant paradigm. Sometimes, however, an anomaly is sufficiently problematic, or an alternative paradigm sufficiently attractive, to prompt a crisis and eventually a "scientific revolution." This transition from an old paradigm to a new one "is far from a cumulative process," more like a "gestalt

switch” than a refinement of the old paradigm (Kuhn 1996: 86). One sees science in a new light; theories and even data of the old paradigm are often not even translatable into the new one. Kuhn point out, for example, that whereas many today think of Einstein’s physics as a refinement of Newton’s, within which Newtonian physics is merely an approximation, in fact “Einstein’s theory can be accepted only with the recognition that Newton’s was wrong” (Kuhn 1996: 100) and even the most basic “variables and parameters” in each’s theory – the variables referring to “time, mass, etc.” – have different meanings in the two theories. The “fundamental structural elements of which the universe ... is composed” are different; the apparent similarity of Einstein’s laws of motion at slow speeds to Newton’s laws is merely superficial (Kuhn 1996: 101-2). Similarly, any true scientific revolution changes the whole “conceptual network through which scientists view the world” (Kuhn 1996: 102). Put another way, both deeply Kantian and deeply historicist, “after a revolution, scientists are responding to a different world,” or, even more radically, “when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them” (Kuhn 1996: 111).

Scientific revolutions do not simply replace a falsified theory with one that fits all the empirical evidence. Often, in fact, new paradigms fit available evidence worse than old ones. Because previous evidence was collected in order to confirm the old paradigm, the new paradigm often has a very difficult time making sense of it. Kuhn points out that Copernicus’s astronomy did not predict the motions of planets any better than Ptolemy’s, Lavoisier’s revolution that paved the way for modern chemistry “deprive[ed] chemistry of some actual and much potential explanatory power” (Kuhn 1996: 107, cf. 131), and “the striking quantitative success of both Plank’s radiation law and the Bohr atom quickly persuaded many physicists to adopt them even though, viewing physical science as a whole, these contributions created many more problems than they solved” (Kuhn 1996: 154). What new paradigms bring is not primarily better ways of handling old evidence but new ways of looking at the world, new criteria for success in science, new assumptions about what sorts of empirical problems are worth investigating, new ways of interpreting empirical data, new experimental techniques, and even new criteria for deciding amongst competing theories. Whereas “progress” makes sense “during periods of normal science” where a paradigm provides accepted standards, it makes no sense for measuring shifts between paradigms: “a decision [between competing paradigms] can only be made on faith” (Kuhn 1996: 158). But then “[w]e may ... have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them close and closer to the truth” (Kuhn 1996: 170, but cf. Kuhn 1977).

Kuhn developed his notion of paradigm shifts primarily within the philosophy of natural sciences, and his overall theory has led to a wide growth in investigations of historical and social conditions that shape scientific theory and practice. Thus sociologists of science offer detailed studies of social, cultural, and psychological factors that shape scientific developments. At their most extreme, historicist studies defend the social construction of “scientific facts” or “quarks” (see Latour and Woolgar 1986 and Pickering 1984). Feminist philosophers of science show how the male-dominance of science skews collection and interpretation of data (Longino 1990). Kuhn’s concept of “paradigm shift” has filtered into culture more generally, resulting in historicist conceptions of knowledge according to which experiences, practices and our world itself are constituted by paradigms that change and can differ between different groups of people. What the world looks like from-within, including the most basic norms for how one evaluates one’s beliefs, is historically-conditioned.

This Kuhnian historicism is, in some respects, strikingly Kantian. Like Kant, Kuhn suggests that human experience is structured by forms of cognition that precede that experience. With his claim that different scientists inhabit different worlds, Kuhn even endorses something like Kant's Copernican turn (Kuhn 1966: 110). With Kant, moreover, Kuhn gives reasons to reject strong scientific realism by showing how science results from presuppositions human beings bring to analysis of the world. Scientific theories, whether about atoms or human nature, are constructed in the context of prior commitments. While this need not wholly undermine the "rationality" of science nor even some sort of scientific "objectivity" (see Kuhn 1977), it calls into question the strong scientific realism implicit in philosophical naturalism. Kuhn goes further in this respect than Kant, claiming that "the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its 'real' counterpart in nature ... seems ... illusive in principle" (Kuhn 1966: 206, cf. too McMullin 1995).

But Kuhn historicizes and relativizes Kant's Copernican turn. Paradigms that are "a priori" in the sense that they structure one's experience of the world are not necessarily "a priori" in the stronger sense of being unrevisable in the light of further empirical research (or even, as has been emphasized by post-Kuhnian sociology of science, of changing social conditions). What scientific theorizing looks like from-within is determined in part by historically contingent facts. This raises the prospect that transcendental forms of cognition that Kant argues to be conditions of possibility of any human experience might merely be historically local paradigms. For Kant, the idea of data that could contradict transcendental categories or forms of intuition was literally not-humanly-thinkable. For Kuhn, such data is not only thinkable but actual. The history of science shows that even apparently necessary claims are abandoned in scientific revolutions that radically restructure our whole approach to our world.

As a vague and general point, this assertion of historical contingency need not be fatal to Kant's transcendental anthropology. Kant's account of empirical concepts leaves room for the development of concepts that shape one's experience of the world, even when these concepts are themselves ultimately rooted not in the necessary structure of human cognition as such but in the contingent ways human beings responds to particular experiences. Kant's accounts of prejudice further suggest a framework for thinking about cognitive structures that are contingent but nonetheless "a priori" in that they shape how we experience the world. Kant's theory of biology comes even closer to Kuhn; experience of natural organisms justifies an a priori principle for further empirical investigation. And Kant's philosophy of history provides bases for thinking that human perspectives on the world can change. Thus Kant could allow that, *in addition to a priori and universal structures of human cognition*, there are also historically contingent mental structures that shape our experience.

Unfortunately, historicist philosophy of science does not let Kant off that easily. First, the details of Kuhn's history of science suggest that the particular structures Kant assumed to be a priori are not. For Kant, space, time, causation, and a continuum of degrees of sensible properties are among the most fundamental a priori conditions of the possibility of any human experience. By virtue of the apriority of space, we can know that (Euclidean) geometry applies to the empirical world. By virtue of the principle of causation, we can know a priori that every alteration has a cause that determined it to occur. But relativity theory seems to require rejecting Euclidean space, and Einstein's notion of "space-time" is inconsistent with Kant's careful

distinction between space and time. Meanwhile, dominant interpretations of quantum mechanics imply that deterministic causation is not universal, that alterations occur probabilistically, the result, at least in part, of random chance. Thus the specific positive metaphysical claims of Kant's transcendental anthropology of cognition seem to be rejected by the best science of our day.

But the problem is even deeper. Precisely because Kant's transcendental anthropology of cognition did such a good job picking out the best candidates for the most basic presuppositions of human experience, if even these presuppositions are historically conditioned, there seems little hope for *any* truly universal structure of human cognition. All categories by means of which we make sense of the world seem open to revision. The fact that some philosophers suggest rejecting the principle of identity ( $a=a$ ) and even the principle of non-contradiction in order to better make sense of contemporary physics drives this point home even more forcefully. Not only the details of Kant's transcendental anthropology but even the very idea that there could be a universally-human transcendental structure of cognition seem vulnerable to historicist critique.

## ***2. Historicism and the Human Sciences: Foucault***

While the history of natural science contributes important historicist dimensions to understanding human cognition, more radical historicisms have emerged in those sciences devoted to studying human beings as such. The hero of this brand of historicism is Michel Foucault, whose detailed historical analyses of key concepts and practices employed in human self-understanding threaten the universality of not only Kantian cognitive categories but his whole transcendental anthropology. By historically analyzing ways of thinking, Foucault challenges Kant's universalism, and a central proposal of Foucault's work is the historically-conditioned nature of human subjectivity itself. Foucault aims to show the historical emergence and contingency of precisely the conception of the human being that lies at the heart of Kant's anthropology.

Foucault's historicist approach avoids blanket theoretical claims about human historicity. Claiming that "human thinking is always historically-bound," like relativist claims that "all truths are relative," is self-undermining, a purportedly absolute truth that all truths are relative. But Foucault neither assumes an omniscient posture nor makes such overarching pronouncements. Instead, while recognizing and even embracing the historical-situatedness of his own work, Foucault "analyzes specific rationalities" (Foucault 1982: 210), studying particular developments in structures of human knowledge and society. Thus Foucault's first major work, *A History of Madness* (1961), traces the origin of our concept of "mental illness," showing how "mental disease, with the meanings we now give it, is made possible" (Foucault 1988:270, Foucault 1961/2006:504) Foucault's *History of Sexuality* shows, among other things, how sexual categories and even basic structures of ethical life shifts from ancient Greece to Christian Europe to the present. By emphasizing detailed studies of particular cases – the "gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary ... accumulation of source material" (Foucault 1984:76) – Foucault eschews appeals to timeless truths without making absolute claims about the impossibility of such truths. He models historicist thinking while avoiding dogmatic theoretical relativism. Thus Foucault's threat to Kant is not as a competing theory, but a historicist way of

thinking that provides an alternative to Kant's anthropology and depicts that anthropology as historically-local rather than universal.

For Foucault, the "accumulation of source material" is neither a way of tracing the factual flow of history nor a way of describing historical "progress." Instead, like Kuhn, Foucault emphasizes the historicity of basic structures of human thought and action. Foucault's approach is "deliberately both historical and critical, ... concerned ... with determining the conditions of possibility of" particular forms of experience (Foucault 1994: xix). This historical method includes two key components: "archeology" and "genealogy." The former describes a "historical a priori," and "episteme" or "epistemological field" that defines "conditions of possibility" of knowledge in particular historical epoch. (Foucault 1969/1982: 127) Whereas Kant's a priori categories of experience are purportedly universal, formal structures of any possible human cognition, Foucault's historical a priori is "not a condition of validity . . . , but a condition for the reality of statements," describing historically-contingent conditions structuring what is thought at any given time. To this archaeological excavation of historical epistemological fields, Foucault adds a genealogical component that traces how different fields arise and change, appropriate and dominate one another. It is "the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts" (Foucault 1984: 86).<sup>1</sup> Consistent with both Kuhnian historiography and Nietzschean genealogy, Foucault's histories emphasize contingency and complexity in historical changes and reject "progress" towards some supra-historical ideal.

Foucault (unlike Kuhn) explains the emergence, modification, and reinterpretation of various epistemic fields in terms of power or domination. While Kuhnian paradigms are relatively benign structures of thought, and Kantian categories are necessary conditions that function to empower humans to know the world, Foucaultian epistemes are moves in a "hazardous play of dominations" (Foucault 1984: 83, cf. Foucault 1977: 27). This is not the simplistic claim that people often advance agendas by trying to get others to think like them. Foucault's approach to power does not center on its use by some human agents to dominate and control others, but on systems of knowledge and action that constrain and enable further knowing and acting (Foucault 1977: 27-8; 1984:150). Foucault focuses on social and institutional forces that are both "made up" of human actions and also "determine the forms and possible domains" of human thought and action. Thus, for example, "a certain way of rendering men docile and useful ... required the involvement of definite relations of knowledge ... [and thereby] ... made the human sciences historically possible" (Foucault 1977: 305). Power structures of modern society shifted from emphasizing the king's absolute power over subjects to punishing free and equal citizens and then to establishing "normality" in a population. The present "carceral society" that seeks "docile and useful" human bodies depends upon knowledge of human beings as subject-objects capable of (self-)control/responsibility and allows for techniques of observation that make the construction of this sort of knowledge possible. This does not mean that "human sciences emerged from the prison" (Foucault 1977: 305); Foucault is not claiming some sort of plot on the part of political leaders to set up empirical human sciences

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault scholars often distinguish between a period within which archeology is Foucault's primary method of history (beginning with *History of Madness* and ending with *The Order of the Things* and *The Archeology of Knowledge*) and a period within which genealogy dominates his approach (in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*). But although Foucault does not explicitly articulate genealogy as governing his approach until "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971) elements of both methods are evident through his work. The shift between early and later works is primarily one of emphasis.

in order to better control subjects. Rather, he emphasizes a power-knowledge *system* that requires both certain forms of domination and certain forms of knowledge (Foucault 1990:95, Foucault 1980: 203).

This de-centering of the subject as locus of power and knowledge arises from Foucault's historicizing of the very notion of a human "subject." For Foucault, the subject itself is a recent historical emergence, a part of our present episteme, and one the contingency of which Foucault aims to reveal. Foucault's work as a whole is a "history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (Foucault 1982: 208) While revealing the contingency of this conception of the human as subject-object, Foucault refuses simply to adopt the episteme he analyzes. Instead, his genealogical methodology effects new ways of studying power and knowledge that do not depend upon "the human" as subject.

Foucault's historical a priori is thus much more radical than Kuhn's because Foucault calls into question the whole idea of the thinking subject as locus of cognition/knowledge.

[Genealogy] needed to be something more than the simple relativization of the ... phenomenological<sup>2</sup> subject. I don't believe the problem can be solved by historicizing the subject ..., fabricating a subject that evolves through the course of history. One has ... to arrive at ... what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history. (Foucault 1984: 58-9)

Foucault's historical a priori is not a subjective from-within perspective that changes through different historical conditions. For Foucault, neither knowledge nor the a priori are primarily "within" subjects. Knowledge is part of a knowledge-power structure that constrains and includes human actions; the "subject" that is the focus of Kant's transcendental anthropology is, for Foucault, a recent innovation of our present knowledge-power complex, an innovation wrapped up with domination in the service of docile normalcy, an innovation that – in theory but especially in historical practice – Foucault seeks to resist and reinterpret. By describing how "we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge" (Foucault 1983: 237), Foucault de-privileges Kant's "transcendental" perspective, reinterpreting it as a contingent perspective created by historically-local power relations (Foucault 1973: 310, 322).

The human "subject" Foucault describes is not merely Kant's transcendental anthropos, but the whole "empirico-transcendental doublet" that seemingly characterizes Kant's anthropology as a whole. For Foucault, Kant inaugurated a shift from a Classical conception of thinking-as-representation to a view of human cognition as something that orders the world in terms of its *own* nature. But for Foucault, this shift leads to a problem, since "man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of [empirical] knowledge and as a subject which knows." In its 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century forms, this ambiguous position leads to an "analytic of finitude," where thinkers aim to show how "man's being will be able to provide a foundation in their own positivity for all those forms that indicate to him that he is not infinite" (Foucault 1973:312, 315). In the end, Foucault argues that this analytic is irresolvable, that the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault says "phenomenological" here to target Husserl and Heidegger, but he makes similar points about Kantian "transcendental" subjects (Foucault 1969/1982: 128).



represent a series of failed attempts to analyze the human being as “a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what makes all knowledge possible” (Foucault 1973:318, see too 322). The result an intellectual culture that “produces, surreptitiously and in advance, the confusion of the empirical and the transcendental ... [a]nd so we find philosophy falling asleep once more . . ., this time not in the sleep of Dogmatism but that of Anthropology [where a]ll empirical knowledge, provided it concerns man, can serve as a possible philosophical field in which the foundation of knowledge, the definition of its limits, and, in the end, the truth of truth must be discovered” (Foucault 1973:341). Foucault thus suggests a shift away from “man” as object of anthropological investigation towards a “Nietzschean ... promise of the superman,” a refusal – “with a philosophical laugh” – to give into the myth of “man” (Foucault 1973:342-3).

This genealogy of “man” challenges virtually every aspect of Kant’s anthropology. Archeological and genealogical investigations of how empirical human sciences are caught up in systems of domination and control reveal the contingency and potential dangers of these sciences. These analyses challenge naturalist attempts to use empirical sciences to answer the question “What is the human being?”, but they also call into question Kant’s own empirical (and pragmatic) anthropology, which, like its more contemporary forms, depends upon classification and observation in the service of normalization and control. Moreover, Foucault’s genealogical treatments of how “we constitute ourselves as moral agents” (Foucault 1983: 237) – aim to show that the way we (and Kant) think of ethics is historically local. While Kant’s transcendental anthropology of volition starts from the “fact” of moral obligation, Foucault claims that “[N]obody is obliged in classical ethics (Foucault 1983: 240). If moral responsibility itself is merely an aspect of modern European knowledge-power, Kant’s moral philosophy merely answers the question “What ought I – as an eighteenth-century modern man – do?” and his “anthropology” is really just a study of human beings living within a particular, contingent system of knowledge-power. The moral law is “universal” only in representing a particularly modern-European ambition to subordinate all diversity and particularity to a single overarching system of normalcy. And “autonomy” is really just how observational systems of the modern world seek to impose power through creating self-disciplining human beings. For Foucault, “Kant introduces one more way in our tradition whereby the self is not merely given but is constituted in relationship to itself as subject” (Foucault 1983: 252).

Even Kant’s question “What is the human being?” is suspect: “the notion of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of ...designating certain types of discourse...” (Foucault 1984: 4). “[M]an, as a primary reality with its own density, as the difficult object and sovereign subject of all possible knowledge” is a recent innovation, something with “no place” even in the Classical era of Descartes, much less in ancient or medieval forms of life (Foucault 1973: 310). Even if the question could make sense, Kant’s answer to it is, at best, the careful analysis of a particular eighteenth-century episteme that plays a role in our self-conceptions. But unlike Kant’s “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History” that depict the emergence of a from-within perspective that is now, for all intents and purposes, the necessary structure of human beings as such, Foucault’s “genealogy of the subject” aims to disclose the contingency of human subjectivity as it emerged in our culture in order to open up possibilities for revision:

The target now is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are ... We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through refusal of [the] kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault 1982: 216)

Rather than transcendental justification of “the” structure of subjectivity through analysis of its conditions of possibility, Foucault offers a genealogy of the emergence of our distinctive forms of subjectivity in order to refuse those forms. Summing up his relationship with Kant, Foucault explains,

If the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point is, in brief, to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression.

This entails an obvious consequence: that criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method.

Archaeological – and not transcendental – in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know, but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom. (Foucault 1984: 45-6)

### ***3. Cultural Diversity***

Historicism is one form of a general trend towards emphasizing human diversity. For historicists, there is no uniform answer to the question “What is the human being?” because human beings change. But even at any given time, humanity includes substantial diversity based on sex or gender, race or ethnicity, and culture. In chapter five, we discussed Kant’s (over)attentiveness to such distinctions and looked at contemporary responses to Kant’s accounts of sex, gender, race, and ethnicity. This section focuses on the important role that increased awareness of cultural difference plays in conceptions of “the” human being today. Recognizing and appreciating distinct human cultures is not new, but increased globalization has made diversity more obvious, important, and endangered than ever.

Increased awareness of human diversity brings both practical and philosophical challenges. Like historicism, awareness of diversity threatens Kant’s anthropology with

relativism. If some cultures do not ascribe moral responsibility to one another, or do not see morality as universal, that would call into question Kant's moral philosophy. If some cultures do not understand the world in terms of necessary causal interactions between spatial-temporal objects, that would threaten his epistemology. Kant's empirical anthropology, with its tidy classification of human mental states, is based upon the introspection and limited observations of a man who never went more than ninety miles from home. Today one might wonder whether there really are empirically universal characteristics of human nature. Even Kant's conception of "unsocial sociability" driving human progress might seem incompatible with the existence of relatively peaceful and stable cultures.

Practically, increased interactions require discerning what responsibilities we have with respect to those from other cultures. For Kant, enlightenment arises through the vibrant exchange of ideas aiming towards the truth. But this truth-orientation is also an orientation towards agreement, or conformity. As "multiculturalism" and "pluralism" have come to be taken as goods in their own right, one might question Kant's emphasis on agreement. Might it not be better to allow, protect, and even promote widely divergent conceptions of reality amongst different human groups (e.g. by protecting dying languages)? Morally, we might ask how respect for others should manifest itself in interactions with those from other cultures. For example, if women in a particular culture are mistreated or abused, should "we" refrain from interfering out of respect for the culture or should we intervene out of respect for the woman? Or is there some other option? Politically, problems of diversity are acute. Kant used his claim that no political order is fully just until it becomes part of a global federation of states to argue against unjust colonization of other peoples (PP 8:357-60, MM 6:353). But he also recognized that his own theory of universal consent is susceptible to an all-too-common "Jesuitism" that would "ask whether ... we should not be authorized to found colonies, by force if need be, in order to establish a civil union ... and bring these human beings (savages) into a rightful condition" (6:266). As many today promote visions of "liberal empire" (Arneil 2007:302), these problems are particularly urgent.

One popular way of reacting to human diversity is to embrace cultural relativism about truth, virtue, and beauty. As in the case of historicism, there are both methodological and substantive versions of this relativism. Methodologically, at least a limited relativism has become a norm among cultural anthropologists. In studying other cultures, anthropologists typically focus on discerning the practices, presuppositions, and values of a particular culture without aiming to assess the value of those practices in terms of supposedly absolute standards. Clifford Geertz makes explicit the "relativist bent" that is "in some sense implicit in the field as such" (Geertz 2007:44). And Ruth Benedict, in her classic *Patterns of Culture* (Benedict 1934/2005), explains:

To the anthropologist, our customs and those of a New Guinea tribe are two possible social schemes for dealing with a common problem, and insofar as he remains an anthropologist he is bound to avoid any weighing of one in favor of the other. (Benedict 1934/2005: 1)

Methodologically, the relativist bent of anthropologists commits them to a different project than that of philosophers or even many psychologists. Rather than trying to figure out the best way of dealing with various problems that might arise in societies, anthropologists observe and seek to understand how other cultures respond to those problems. To avoid projecting one's values onto other cultures and to remain sensitive to their nuances, some sort of relativism – at least in the

negative sense of refraining as much as possible from evaluating other cultures in terms of one's own – has proven immensely valuable for understanding human diversity.

Substantive relativism takes this relativist bent further, claiming that basic concepts of truth and value *are* culture-relative and not merely in that what people *find* true and valuable is largely culture-bound, but that truth and value are *in fact* culturally relative. Methodological relativism refrains from asking ultimate questions about Truth or Goodness. Substantive relativism claims that there are no (universal) answers to those questions, that “morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits” (Benedict 1934). Geertz suggests how anthropological research promotes this substantive relativism:

One cannot read too long about Nayar matriliney, Aztec sacrifice, the Hopi verb, or the convolutions of the hominid transition and not begin at least to consider the possibility that, to quote Montaigne . . . , “each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice ... for we have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in.” That notion, whatever its problems, and however more delicately expressed, is not likely to go away unless anthropology does. (Geertz 2001: 44-5)

As much as Geertz and Benedict see substantive relativism as a consequence of anthropological study, however, it does not follow logically from the fact of human diversity, nor from the methodological relativism that enhances our understanding of that diversity. It would be perfectly sensible to recognize that human beings hold different beliefs about physics, for example, or to study different cultures' mathematical systems without evaluating their soundness, while still affirming that, for instance, projectiles really do travel on parabolic paths and spells cannot transform lead into gold. Similarly, it would be perfectly sensible to recognize that human beings have different moral values regulating interactions, while still affirming that, for example, value systems that endorse slavery or malicious deception are wrong.

In its most blatant form, substantive relativism is self-defeating. Benedict rightly notes that “recognition of cultural relativity carries with it its own values,” and while these values “need not be those of [prior] absolutist philosophies” (Benedict 1934/2005: 278), they are just as absolutist as those. In fact, substantive relativism is particularly parochial; while some other cultures may endorse epistemic and moral relativism, the particular forms of relativism dominant today emerged only in the context of moral and anthropological developments in “the West” in the past hundred years. Substantive relativism of this dogmatic sort is just as ethnocentric and absolutist as any other substantive dogma.

There are, however, less dogmatic sorts of relativism that still go beyond the merely methodological relativism of contemporary anthropology. Anthropological study, like Foucault's and Kuhn's historical studies, can show that from-within perspectives Kant took for granted are less universal than he supposed. Citing his own pioneering work in cultural anthropology, Geertz notes,

[T]he constructivism of Thomas Kuhn and ... Foucault ... suddenly made a concern with meaning-making an acceptable pre-occupation for a scholar to have [and] they provided the ... speculative instruments to make the existence of someone who saw human beings as, quoting myself ... “suspended in webs of meaning they themselves have spun” a good deal easier ... [In] Bali, ... I tried to show that kinship, village form, the traditional state, ... and,

most infamously, the cockfight could be read as ... enacted statements of ... particular ways of being in the world. (Geertz 2001: 17)

For Geertz, “The whole point of this ... approach to culture is ... to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them” (Geertz 1973: 24). In that context, “descriptions of Berber, Jewish, or French culture must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchman to place upon what they live through” (Geertz 1973: 15), and one comes to see one’s own “ideas [and] values ... [as] cultural products” (Geertz 1973: 50). Entering others’ “worlds” inhibits Kant’s kind of transcendental anthropology, not because of a dogmatic assertion that there are no universals, but simply because we come to see new possibilities – and hence new “conditions of possibility.” One need not deny a universal point of view to make one’s own point of view seem provincial. And a transcendental analysis of a provincial and contingent point of view falls short of the anthropology in which Kant was so interested.

As in the case of historicism, with this *general* objection come *specific* points of comparison between what Kant took to be universal aspects of human nature and what anthropologists find in other cultures. For example, Ruth Benedict describes the Dobu of the South Pacific in ways particularly problematic for Kant’s moral philosophy:

The Dobuan is dour, prudish, and passionate, consumed with jealousy and suspicion and resentment. Every moment of prosperity he conceives himself to have wrung from a malicious world by a conflict in which he has worsted an opponent. The good man is the one who has many such conflicts to his credit, as anyone can see from the fact that he has survived with a measure of prosperity. It is taken for granted that he has thieved, killed children and his close associates by sorcery, cheated whenever he dared. [T]heft and adultery are the object of the valued charms of the valued men of the community. (Benedict 1934/2005:168-9)

The general claim that moral norms differ between cultures is troubling, but the *details* of these differences seem to pose particular problems. Whatever Dobuans mean by “good,” they cannot refer to one who acts only on maxims that can be willed to be universal. A “good” person, on Benedict’s reconstruction of the Dobu, acts on maxims that precisely *cannot* be universalized, exploiting his fellows for personal benefit. Any “transcendental anthropology of volition” for the Dobu will, it seems, have to look very different from Kant’s.

Along with this undoing of Kant’s universalist anthropology, many of those interested in human diversity add an ethical and pragmatic “relativist bent.” Geertz, for example, largely accepts the point that substantive relativism is self-undermining. But he takes this precisely as a reason not to worry about objecting to it. As he puts it, “The image of vast numbers of anthropology readers running around in so cosmopolitan a frame of mind as to have no views as to what is and isn’t true, or good, or beautiful, seems to me largely a fantasy” (Geertz 2001: 46). By contrast, however, the thought of lots of Kantians running around interpreting everyone in terms of their own prejudices about knowledge, goodness, and even beauty is one worthy of genuine concern. Thus rather than a Kantian, *universalist* anthropology, we need “connoisseur[s] ... of alien turns of mind,” of whom “the connoisseur par excellence ... has been the ethnographer, dramatizing oddness, extolling diversity, and breathing broadmindedness” (Geertz 2001: 82-3).

Alongside undermining Kantian naïveté about the universality of one's own perspective, many add an ethical sense that "provincialism ... [is a] more real concern [than relativism]" (Geertz 2001: 46). This broadminded love of diversity leads to a new vision for answering the question, "What is the human being?"

[W]hat men are, above all other things, is various. It is in understanding that variousness – its range, its nature, its basis, and its implications – that we shall come to construct a concept of human nature that, more than a statistical shadow and less than a primitive dream, has both substance and truth ... To be human here is thus not to be Everyman; it is to be a particular kind of man, and of course men differ ... [I]t is in a systematic review and analysis of [different ways of being human] – of the Plain's Indian's bravura, the Hindu's obsessiveness, the Frenchman's rationalism, the Berber's anarchism, the American's optimism – that we shall find out what it is, or can be, to be a man. (Geertz 1973: 52-3)<sup>3</sup>

Even without going as far as substantive relativism, contemporary cultural anthropology – and its spin-offs into cultural studies, postcolonial studies, gender studies, and studies of diversity in all its forms – invites a shift in perspective. Just as historicists resist univocal, trans-historical notions of "human being," cultural anthropologists object to a cross-cultural conception of *the* human being, replacing it with rich variety of human ways of being.

#### ***4. Kantian Responses to Historicism***

Kuhn, Foucault, Benedict, and Geertz all draw attention to fundamental human differences that not only reflect empirical variations but also affect how humans see and live in their worlds. They threaten not only Kant's empirical claims, but his transcendental anthropology. While the claims of each thinker require specific responses, contemporary Kantians might use three general strategies of response: "sticking to one's guns," "strategic retreat," or "surrender."

##### *(a) Sticking to one's guns*

The "guns" to which Kant would stick are the basic tenets of his transcendental anthropology. A gun-sticking Kantian would refuse to give up the central claims that all human volition involves awareness of the moral law and all human cognition involves spatial-temporal intuition and a priori categories such as causation. Given challenges posed by scientific developments, this would involve denying that relativity theory and quantum mechanics, as generally interpreted, provide actual cognition of the world. Any contradiction between Kant's transcendental anthropology and Einstein's physics would be bad news for Einstein, not for Kant. With respect to Foucault and Geertz, Kant might simply deny that these figures properly interpreted human history or diverse cultures, or he might deny that the interpretations really represent counter-examples to his transcendental anthropology.

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<sup>3</sup> Geertz adds that this "series of tags" is one that "I should not like to have to defend" and, further, that "we must ... descend in detail, past the misleading tags, past the metaphysical types, past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the essential character of not only the various cultures but the various sorts of individuals within each culture, if we wish to encounter humanity face to face" (Geertz 1973: 53).

While sticking to one's guns might seem simply pig-headed, it is not wholly unjustified. Regarding developments in science, Kant's arguments for the aprioricity of our forms of cognition were based on conditions for arriving at genuine empirical *understandings* of the world. And it is not entirely clear that modern scientific theories are literally understandable in their non-Kantian forms. The mathematics of relativity theory and quantum mechanics does not conflict with Kant's a priori structures of human cognition. Kant never claimed that it would be impossible to *think about* what would follow from rejecting one or more of Euclid's axioms, only that it would be impossible to actually cognize such a world, that is, to fill in one's concepts with intuitions of objects. When "explaining" objects quantum-mechanically or relativistically, scientists notoriously turn to metaphor and analogy, suggesting that literal understandings of modern physics are not yet available. For a gun-sticking Kantian, intuitive comprehensibility would be a constraint on scientific realism, and Kant himself proposes a similar approach against those in his day (and ours!) who assume the existence of a vacuum.

Nearly all natural philosophers, since they perceive a great difference in the quantity of matter of different sorts in the same volume ... infer that this volume ... must be empty in all matter, although to be sure in different amounts. But ... their inference rest[s] solely on a metaphysical presupposition ... for they assume that the *real* in space ... is *everywhere one and the same* and can be differentiated only according to its ... amount. Against this presupposition, ... I oppose a transcendental proof, which, to be sure, will not explain the variation in the filling of space, but which still will entirely obviate the alleged necessity of the presupposition ... which has the merit of at least granting the understanding the freedom to think of this difference in another way. (A173-4/B215-6)

The details of this particular debate are unnecessary here; the general point is that Kant willingly set his transcendental proof against decrees of "nearly all natural philosophers" even when unable explain the phenomena their theories purported to explain. Similarly, a Kantian today might insist that quantum mechanics and relativity theory cannot be adequate explanations of the world, since they are inconsistent with our forms of intuition and thus literally incomprehensible as applied to objects. They can still be good models for prediction, but not for understanding, and rejecting scientific realism here may even "have the merit" of encouraging work in new directions in physics. Akin to Einstein's early critique of quantum mechanics, we might see Kant as insisting that the fact that scientists have not *found* deterministic laws does not imply that there *are* no deterministic laws. Kant might even point out that appeals to sub-atomic quantum states and bendable space-time that cannot be literally understood as we understand objects of experience reflects a 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of the classic metaphysical temptation to turn to things-in-themselves – thinkable but non-intuitable pseudo-objects – as a shortcut for explaining the empirical world.

Similarly, with respect to Foucaultian genealogy and Geertzian anthropology, sticking to one's guns is more plausible than it might at first appear. One approach would involve an attitude towards cultural difference that many ascribe to Kant, to maintain transcendental anthropology by insisting that some peoples and cultures are not "human" in the fullest sense. If a particular group conceives of decision-making *purely* in categories of beauty (as Foucault suggests for the ancient Greeks) or prudence (as Benedict suggests for the people of Dobu), Kant might just say that such people lack a fully developed predisposition to personality and, in that sense, are not really "human." Whether or not this would warrant treating them with disrespect

would remain an open question, but it would be a way of saving Kant's *philosophical* account from anthropological challenge. As offensive as the approach sounds, there is some degree to which it is unavoidable. We see the world through our own eyes and our own values, and while our perspective might change through understanding others, there simply is not – if relativist cultural anthropology is right – a single perspective that all groups share. But since we do decide what to believe and how to act, we will, at least in practice, think and act in accordance with norms we think best, and we will thereby at least implicitly view other groups as seeing through the wrong eyes. Even the relativist bent shared by Benedict, Geertz and Foucault is a particular bent not shared by many other cultures. Insofar as “What is the human being?” is a *normative* question about how *best* to be human, it is inevitable, if we know enough about human diversity, to see some forms of diversity as failures to live up what it means to be a human in the fullest sense.

But there are other, less judgmental, ways for a Kantian to stick to her guns. One important move for the Kantian will be to distinguish between *particular* knowledge or value claims and the overall *structure* of knowledge- or value-claims. Even if other cultures, for example, disagree about what causes particular kinds of changes, they may still agree on the notion of temporal succession (and thereby on some shared conception of causation). Even if cultures disagree about, say, cannibalism, they might still adhere to some general conception of respect for others. And even if – as in Benedict's account of the Dobu – some cultures do not even believe in anything that could be called Kantian respect, they might still adhere to a sense of “goodness” as something that would be “good” for anyone. Thus one of Benedict's Dobuans might say that *anyone* who successfully exploits and abuses others is “good.” And in such a case, Kant might be able to run transcendental arguments to show that built into this conception of goodness is a standard at variance with the particular ethical prescriptions of Benedict's Dobu.

Kant also could rightly insist upon a difference between from-within standpoints of evaluation and deliberation and peoples' actual customs and practices. Kant admits that human beings are “radically evil” and even that this evil manifests itself in corrupting societies such that “someone already counts as good when his evil is common to a class” (6:33). Given variable conditions, human inclinations and prejudices develop in different ways, with correspondingly different manifestations of immorality in different cultures. Thus just as the Dobu might excuse the immorality of adultery or witchcraft and praise its prudence, those on Wall Street might excuse the immorality of competitive “sharp practice” and praise the returns brought home to shareholders. In neither case are these forms of praise reflections of a different moral code; they just reflect ordinary ways social forms of radical evil corrupt strict applications of the moral law.

Finally, Kant might rightly point out that much perceived variation amongst cultures could be due to a *prejudgment* or inclination towards novelty, one widely shared by the sorts of people that typically become anthropologists and (Foucauldian) historians. Kant emphasizes,

from a multiplicity of descriptions of countries one can prove, if one wants to, that Americans, Tibetans, and other genuine Mongolian peoples have no beard, but also, if it suits you better, that all of them are by nature bearded . . . ; that Americans and Negroes are each a race, sunk beneath the remaining of the human species in their mental predispositions, but on the other side by just as apparent records that as regards their natural predispositions, they are to be estimated equal to every other inhabitant of the world; so it remains to the choice of the philosopher whether he wants to assume differences in nature or



wants to judge everything in accordance with the principle “Everything is as it is with us.” (8:62)

A certain relativistic bent – and often even an Orientalizing fascination with the exotic (see Said 1979, Obeyesekere 1993, 2005) – is not only a natural *result* of anthropological study, but a sort of dispositional and methodological *presupposition* of certain kinds of anthropological investigation (including, alas, Kant’s). Likewise, Foucault’s genealogical and archaeological projects, as much as they seem to provide evidence of the historical emergence of frameworks of thought and action, ultimately *presuppose* a historicist approach to structures of human knowledge-power. In his own *Anthropology*, Kant points out that “without ... a plan ... all acquired knowledge [of the world] can yield nothing more than fragmentary groping around and no science,” and for Kant, this plan requires that “*General* knowledge always precede *local* knowledge,” that is, that one have a sense of the human being in general before studying local variations (7:120). Whether or not one agrees with *this* methodological prescription, it is worth noting that anthropologists studying the world with this sort of Kantian methodology may come to very different conclusions than those who *begin* with a more relativistic bent. There is reason for at least some skepticism about the empirical findings – and their interpretations – offered by the more relativistically-inclined anthropologists amongst us.

Thus whereas Foucault focuses on the *emergence* of contemporary notions of subjectivity, a Kantian historicist might instead look for Kantian conceptions of subjectivity in historical periods when Foucault denies them and in cultural contexts where contemporary anthropologists claim not to find them. Where Foucault claims that “nobody is obliged in classical ethics,” Kant might claim that classical notions of “beautiful existence” are taken, even in ancient Greece, as “to-be-chosen” in ways that correspond to categorical “obligation.”<sup>4</sup> Historical ways of describing subjectivity would be merely different “formulae” for common underlying transcendental structures that Kant elucidates in terms of “obligation,” “freedom,” and “autonomy.” It is worth emphasizing here that Kant’s moral anthropology and conception of subjectivity were at variance even with what one may have discovered – as an anthropologist or historian – about *his own time*. Kant emphasizes the independence of conscience from religion, the importance of adhering to strict principles, the extent to which morals must be carefully distinguished from the pursuit of happiness. Kant saw these claims as *implicit* in the volitional structure of his compatriots (and human beings in general), but all of them could have been occluded in historical or anthropological studies of his culture.

This skepticism, of course, can lead to a different way of doing anthropology, but time must tell whether this Kantian cultural anthropology could hold up to empirical facts on the ground. There are, however, promising hints that an anthropology that leaves more room for human universals – especially of the rational variety in which Kant would be most interested – may be more fruitful than anthropologists like Benedict and Geertz suggest (see e.g. Bok 2002, Pinker 1992). Perhaps the most famous example in recent anthropology is the debate between two preeminent contemporary anthropologists – Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins – regarding the Hawaiians’ reception of Captain Cook. While Sahlins undertook that study largely with the “relativist bent” of a European interested in the exotic and developed a picture of native

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<sup>4</sup> Kant’s ethics, in fact, is often referred to as “deontological,” from the *Greek* term “*dei*,” which refers to that which is binding or what it behooves one to do, as in the *Iliad*’s “*ti de dei polemizemenai . . . Argeious*” (why do the *Argives* have to fight?) (11.9.337).

Hawaiians that makes them seem very different from Europeans then and now, Obeyesekere went into the study with a skepticism about the nature of European anthropological and “myth-making” practices and called into question exoticizing descriptions of the reception of Cook shared by modern anthropologists and ultimately even Hawaiians themselves.<sup>5</sup>

To take a less famous and more pointed example, Susanne Kuehling has recently published a book-length study of the Dobu people in which she makes clear not only the profound limitations of the original field research on which Benedict relied (by an anthropologist who consulted *one* Dobuan for one month and wrote with “the imperial attitude of his time” (Kuehling 2005:14)) but also how “Benedict’s travesty” (Kuehling 2005:136) warped even that “vastly oversimplified” account to portray an “even darker” picture of the Dobu “as an extreme example of human moral possibilities” (Kuehling 2005:16), a “characterization ... that bears no resemblance to [the] Dobu” experienced by Kuehling over the course of several years of intense fieldwork. In sharp contrast to the “inverted morality” portrayed by Benedict, Kuehling highlights the Dobu’s “egalitarian ethic” (Kuehling 2005:117) and emphasizes that among the Dobu an “ethics of respect, self-discipline, and generosity are the keys to appropriate behavior” (Kuehling 2005:69). Of course, Kuehling’s own account, which highlights the “ethics of exchange” as a framework for understanding the Dobu, does not show that they share the general presuppositions of Kant’s moral anthropology, but she goes into her study with a different agenda, with a different “general knowledge,” and thus Kant would be unsurprised that she neither looks for nor finds a Kantian “predisposition to personality.” What she clearly illustrates, however, is the importance of taking *any* anthropological “counter-examples” to Kantian transcendental anthropology with a grain of salt. She thus justifies, at least provisionally, sticking-to-one’s-guns, an unwillingness to take as given the “observations” and “facts” of anthropologists who go into the field with deeply non- or even anti-Kantian presuppositional frameworks.

### *(b) Strategic retreat*

Strategic retreat involves giving up specific a priori structures, such as Euclidean space, Newtonian deterministic causation, or specific formulations of the categorical imperative, but preserving more general a priori structures, roughly corresponding to Kant’s. Just as contemporary psychology requires revising details of Kant’s empirical anthropology but not his overall framework, historicist or anthropological studies might require revising details of Kant’s transcendental anthropology. Alternative, one might strategically retreat by limiting the *scope* of Kant’s a priori structures, insisting that they underlie ordinary experience but not scientific or moral theorizing.

As with sticking-to-one’s-guns, strategic retreat is more plausible and more significant than it might first appear. With respect to relativity theory, for example, Henrik Lorentz had developed an “empirically equivalent” alternative to Einsteinian special relativity theory that

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<sup>5</sup> A full discussion of this debate would go far beyond the scope of this book. For a clear overview with further references, see Borofsky and Kane 1997.

preserves an “essentially classical spatio-temporal structure” (Friedman 2001:87). And the probabilistic causation of quantum mechanics already fits with a slightly modified version of Kant’s approach to causation. For Kant, the fundamental role of causation is to preserve the directionality of time. Kant assumed that the only causal principle by which one could order the world requires that given effects necessarily follow causes according to deterministic rules. With quantum mechanical causation, succeeding states follow initial states according to probabilistic rules. While giving up determinism would be an important shift, it would not require relinquishing the basic structure of succeeding states following from previous ones according to rules.

One might imagine retreating further, such that one ends up with increasingly thin a priori structures of cognition. Kuhn himself argues for some form of this approach, defending general epistemic virtues such as accuracy, consistency, simplicity, and fruitfulness as general characteristics of any good scientific theory (Kuhn 1977). Similarly, Kant might argue that whatever particular structures human beings use to interpret their world, they make use of certain a priori principles to guide empirical cognition. This strategy could be extended to variations in conceptions of the world discovered by anthropologists. While other cultures may allow for witchcraft, cycles of time, or radically different approaches to understanding the world, one might still find common basic structures underlying them all. Even something like Foucault’s analysis of earlier forms of subjectivity might leave structures – say, some general notion of normativity or basic distinction between a from-within and an objective perspective – that are common to different, historically-local ways of conceptualizing these structures.

Beyond changing particular claims while keeping more general ones, an important sort of strategic retreat, especially in the scientific context, would concede historicism about scientific cognition while preserving Kant’s transcendental anthropology for ordinary cognition. Even if scientists now think of the world as involving probabilistic causation and non-Euclidean space, ordinary human experience is universally and ahistorically based on Kant’s a priori cognitive structures. Especially conjoined with a deprivileging of scientific cognition, such a retreat preserves a substantial role for Kant’s transcendental anthropology of cognition while leaving science subject to historicism. One might do something similar with other cultures, arguing that, say, religious or mythical beliefs might violate Kant’s categories of experience while everyday interactions would still be governed by them.

### *(c) Surrender*

Strategic retreat might go so far that nothing worth saving is left of Kant’s transcendental anthropology. Even the most basic cognitive and volitional values might be exposed as historically contingent. In this context, one might simply need to concede that Kant’s transcendental anthropology must be replaced by a historicist one. Even outright surrender, however, need not involve a wholesale rejection of insights from Kant’s transcendental anthropology. For example, one prominent Kantian philosopher of science has defended a “modified version of a Kantian philosophy of science” centered around the concept of a “relativized yet still constitutive a priori” (Friedman 2001:71). Friedman embraces the historical contingency of cognitive structures while sustaining a commitment to seeing these structures as constitutive of (our understanding of) that world. For Friedman, even a relativized a priori is an

important contribution to contemporary philosophy of science in that it implies, against Quine's holistic "fabric" of knowledge, that knowledge has a structure with "fundamental asymmetries," such that within any (scientific) body of knowledge, there are "necessary presuppositions constituting the conditions of possibility of the properly empirical parts" (Friedman 2001: 35, 37). Even if every aspect of human knowledge is in principle revisable in the light of further experience, there is a fundamental distinction between the ways that specific empirical laws and the (relativized) a priori structures of cognition are revisable. Even when historicized, the general approach of Kant's transcendental anthropology contributes to understanding human beings. Arguably, it is even Kant's transcendental anthropology of cognition that makes Kuhnian historicism possible. Without Kant, one might be able to trace, as Quine does, the evolution of different ways of thinking about the world. But one would be unable to see, as Kuhn does, the way that historically changing ways of looking at the world structure and constrain human experience itself.

In the context of Foucault, too, surrender would require a radical reorientation of Kant's anthropology but need not require rejecting it entirely. Importantly, a strategy like Friedman's – that concedes the historicity of a priori structures – would not constitute a sufficient concession to Foucault, since Foucault historicizes the whole notion of a priori structures of an individual subject. In the case of Foucault, at least, "surrender" is little more than conversion, a replacement of Kant with Foucault. But arguably, this replacement remains within the general sphere of Kant. Foucault read Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" as a proto-historicist work (see Foucault 1984: 32-50), and Foucault's intellectual career began with his effort to struggle through problems in Kant's *Anthropology* (see Foucault 2008). Thus Foucault is a sort of radically-historicized Kant, and in that sense, Foucault himself is an excellent model for what a "Kantian-Foucaultian" might look like.

Finally, even a complete Kantian surrender to cultural relativism could be interesting and important. In particular, Kantian distinctions can help cultural anthropologists more effectively study other cultures. The difference between transcendental and empirical anthropology is an important one for cultural anthropologists. It is one thing to describe how people act and even the way they use normative language, and it is another thing to investigate how thoughts and actions appear from-within. The latter task is more difficult than the former for an "outsider," and if the from-within perspectives of others are radically incommensurable with our own, it may be impossible. But clarifying the distinction will force anthropologists to direct attention in more precise ways. Moreover, even within transcendental anthropology, there is an important distinction between first-order normative claims and the elucidation of conditions of possibility for those claims. For example, it is one thing to say, from-within, that the boat is moving downstream; it is another to show – as Kant claims to do – that a condition of possibility of the legitimacy of such judgments is a category of causality. The investigation of transcendental conditions of possibility of "alien" ways of thinking and valuing could be an exciting Kantian philosophical anthropology (here using "anthropology" in something like its contemporary sense), a development of *different* transcendental anthropologies (here using "anthropology" in something like its Kantian sense).

## **5. The problem of normativity**

In various ways, historians, historicist philosophers, and anthropologists challenge Kant's anthropology. The last section looked at a series of approaches that Kantians can use to respond

to these challenges while preserving, to varying degrees, a distinctively “Kantian” approach to historical and cultural diversity. But regardless of which of these approaches one adopts, there arises a further important question, one that mere *descriptions* of human difference and historical change cannot answer: What are the implications of human differences for how we, here and now, *should* think, feel, and act? As *descriptions* of human difference and historical change, historicist and anthropological accounts are challenging and illuminating. But in themselves, they don’t tell us what to *do* with these descriptions.

In his *Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault highlights this problem: his method “is concerned – outside of all prescriptive intent – with determining the conditions of possibility of medical experience in modern times” (Foucault 1994: xix, emphasis added). In their study of Foucault, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow add, with respect to Foucault’s self-proclaimed goal of “seeking to give new impetus ... to the undefined work of freedom” (Foucault 1984: 45-6) by resisting the “docile normalcy” of carceral society,

What is wrong with carceral society? Genealogy undermines a stance which opposes it on the grounds of natural law or human dignity ... Genealogy also undermines opposing carceral society on the basis of subjective preferences and intuitions ... What are the resources which enable us to sustain a critical stance? (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 206) <sup>6</sup>

The same point could be made with respect to Kuhn. If categories and practices of modern science are recent and revisable paradigms, what should we do? Should we oppose normal science and try to think of what is truly necessary? Should we simply embrace a scientific process that may be leading us down a misguided path? Similarly, Benedict and Geertz argue that our moral and epistemic values may not be shared by other cultures. If this is true, should we abandon those values? Should we adopt the values of the Dobu? (If so, whose Dobu?)

These questions remind us that there is, in fact, a from-within, norm-governed perspective. And they remind that empirical descriptions, whether natural-scientific or historical, cannot answer normative questions. Foucault, Kuhn, and Benedict show that the fact that one holds a particular normative standard can be explained in terms of historical and cultural conditions. But when I, or you, or Foucault or Benedict, decide whether or not to apply a standard, even one that has been revealed as historically-local, we cannot merely think about that standard in historicist or culturally-relativist terms. While Foucault’s histories or Geertz’s ethnographies broaden our sense of possible ways of thinking and acting, they cannot in the end tell us how to decide, within that range, what to think or do.

One response to this predicament – Kant’s – is to look again, from-within, at the ever-better-understood world in which we live. As we gain new insights into other time periods and other cultures, we can ask ourselves transcendental questions about those insights themselves: what are the conditions of possibility of historical knowledge? How is it possible that we are able to know such things about other cultures? What are the limits of such knowledge-claims? For Kant, the answers to these questions will *include* his general conditions of possibility for knowledge (space, time, causality, etc), and will likely include other more specific conditions of

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault seems to recognize that history provides no guide here: “The historian’s essential role ... [is to provide] a topological and geological survey of the battlefield ... But as for saying, ‘Here is what you must do!’, certainly not” (Foucault 1980:62).

possibility (in the way that biological knowledge requires assuming purposiveness). We can go further, developing our transcendental anthropology of volition in the light of new insights about other cultures. What sorts of obligations might one have towards people with different moral norms? What are the conditions of possibility of mutual respect across cultural difference? What are my duties towards diverse others, especially as I come into greater contact with them? And while these questions, for Kant, involve various new subsidiary moral principles, they all require application of the universal moral law.

## SUMMARY

Historicism and cultural anthropology present detailed accounts of human diversity. Kuhn shows how scientific progress effects changes in paradigms that might otherwise seem to be fixed and transcendental conditions of possibility of empirical cognition. By depicting their emergence as historically-contingent ways of conceiving of human beings, Foucault challenges Kant's moral theory, his conception of human subjectivity, and his "transcendental-empirical" account of the human being as a whole. And Benedict, Geertz, cultural anthropologists more generally, and a whole range of disciplines focused on human diversity challenge the purported universality of Kant's anthropological claims. To all of these thinkers, Kant has a variety of available responses, ranging from sticking to his guns and insisting that there simply is not as much real diversity as they suggest, to partially retreating and allowing for some deep variations but within a framework that is still in some respects universal, to a complete but still Kantian surrender that preserves important Kantian insights about the nature of transcendental perspective but historicizes and relativizing this "a priori." All historicisms, however, face a problem when it comes to putting their insights to use. Human beings must decide what to think and do, and knowing that our frameworks for making these decisions are historically or culturally contingent does not directly tell us what to make of this knowledge. Thus there remains, from-within, a need for some normative framework for dealing with diversity.

One might, of course, seek normative frameworks other than Kant's. In chapter ten, we look at several responses that preserve the basic notion that there are norms that can and should govern our thought and action from-within, but that vary regarding the universality and foundations of those norms. One might also – like Nietzsche – take diversity as a basis for liberation into a creativity that rises above present values. The lesson of historicism and cultural diversity, one might think, is that we should stop *looking* for absolute standards "out there," and start *making* cognitive and volitional standards for ourselves. In its most influential modern form, this emphasis expresses itself in existentialism, to which we now turn.

## FURTHER READING

The best works to read for getting a sense of Kuhn, Foucault, and Geertz are works by those authors themselves. *Structure* is Kuhn's classic work and Kuhn 2000 collects many important papers that trace later developments of that view. Nickles is a good collection of essays on Kuhn's thought with helpful references for further study.

Thomas Nickles (ed.), *Thomas Kuhn* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1996)

Thomas Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure* (ed. James Conant and John Haugeland, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)

*The Order of Things* is the published work in which Foucault most directly engages with Kant, but the set of essays included in *The Foucault Reader* gives a better overview of his philosophy. Dreyfus and Rabinow, which includes two important essays by Foucault, is a good scholarly overview of Foucault's thought. Gutting is a great short overview of Foucault, and Han helpfully situates Foucault vis-à-vis Kant.

Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (University of Chicago Press, 1983)

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Vintage, 1994)

Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (ed. Paul Rabinow, Pantheon, 1984)

Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2005)

Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical* (Stanford University Press, 2002)

*Interpretation of Culture* is Geertz's classic articulation of his approach to cultural anthropology, while *Available Light* is a more recent set of reflections on philosophical issues with contemporary anthropology. Benedict and Kuehling provide two sharply contrasting descriptions of the Dobu.

Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Mariner Books, 1934/2005).

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973)

Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000)

Susanne Kuehling, *Dobu: Ethics of Exchange on a Massim Island* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005)

