

Yehuda Elkana

Ernst Cassirer; Comparative Epistemology



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I have had a happy association with the Wissenschaftskolleg from its very inception, and to my pleasant surprise, spending a year there as a Fellow has not only deepened my insight into the life of the Kolleg but has also changed some of my previous perceptions. Comparing it to other Institutes for Advanced Study, where I have had the privilege of spending longer periods of time, it is now from the inside that I can report with conviction that the Kolleg is one of the best in the world today. Not only is the spiritual and material setting conducive to work, but this is today literally the only Institute for Advanced Study, where scholars from the Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and the Humanities are encouraged to, and indeed do talk to each other. This creates a very lively, ongoing intellectual

conversation, starting with breakfast, when Fellows living in the Kolleg are joined by many others having family apartments at the Koenigsallee 20, for the sake of good conversation — if not for breakfast, at least for a cup of coffee. It continues over lunch which is an important institution, in spite of the fact that some Fellows, who would like to spend an undisturbed day at the Staatsbibliothek complain about it. Furthermore, there are the guests who come to visit the Kolleg and are being introduced. They are not only scholars from the various branches of Academe, but also musicians, composers, theatre producers, journalists, critics and others. People are actually encouraged to develop a feel for Berlin's cultural life, which in many cases — and even if unintended — becomes an integral part of the Fellows' academic output.

Although I have been aware of all that before, my year as a Fellow only strengthened my appreciation of it all. On the other hand, I used to believe that in spite of this intellectual ferment, and sometimes even turmoil, Fellows could expect to continue their work on research which they had brought along — and some of it with publishing deadlines on the horizon. This turns out not to be the case.

For many Fellows, the welter of new ideas, the number of new people, new research programmes, and very often totally unexpected world-views suggesting serious alternatives to their own, becomes a catalyzer or an irritant, whichever it maybe, but very few remain unperturbed by it. It results in agitated discussions, sometimes in an emotionally highly-strung intellectual climate. I do not have the slightest doubt that these exchanges, and indeed these "threats" to one's established image of man or image of nature or image of society, sooner or later will make the Fellows' intellectual framework richer and the output of greater significance. On the other hand, it may — and often does — become a serious impediment to one's research or writing plans. This certainly happened to me and, looking back, I am grateful for it.

I came to the Kolleg with a well organized plan to finish a book on Ernst Cassirer, with special emphasis on the contextual sociology of knowledge framework, underlying Cassirer's work, which superficially looks like a history of disembodied ideas. While I did spend most of my time on Cassirer, Berlin, the Kolleg and my Fellow Fellows brought about a serious shift in my approach. It became much more political, with a sharper and I hope deeper look into 20th century German intellectual history and its social determination, and it will certainly take at least a further year to complete the book than it would have taken without all the new input. Yet, I dare hope that in the end it will be a much better book than it would have been otherwise.

My other project for the year was to serve, together with my co-Fellow

Rivka Feldhay, as convenors for an ongoing workshop or Schwerpunkt on Comparative Epistemology. I think it is worth while to dedicate a few paragraphs describing what we were about:

Western culture in the last few hundred years has become predominantly a culture of science. Science is one of the major forces that lead to a unity of our civilization. In a world which for political reasons tends to polarization, this force of unity, with its essentially cumulative image, is of utmost importance. However, the more science enters into our lives, the more it must be humanized. It is well known that since the very nature of man is historical — all biological and cultural traits of men and societies are undergoing constant evolutionary change — there is no better way to unite and humanize science than to study its history.

A systematic study of the culture of science rests on historical consciousness, philosophical acumen and sociological awareness. It bridges a gap between a humanistic approach and a technocratic approach. Actually, science as much as history can be pursued in a humanistic spirit. We know that knowledge is power, but we know also that this power may become a danger if its spirit be fake and if it is bent solely upon material achievements.

The task is double: to develop the intellectual tools on the highest possible level, studying the culture of science in all its ramifications from the combined historical-philosophical-sociological point of view, and to see to it that this spirit and approach are taught both in depth to experts in the various areas, and to as many students as possible as a basis of their general education. In other words, for this thought-complex to be effective it must go simultaneously into depth and breadth. This is the challenge and the vision.

Comparative Epistemology is a newly emerging field of great promise, using the tools of history, philosophy and sociology of knowledge in general and of the different *Wissenschaften* in particular. The aim is to bring together researchers with diverse backgrounds, to investigate, on a meta-theoretical level, the sources, origin, development, changes, method and structures, the aims and the social context of different disciplines, looking for the common element among them as much as for clarity as to the differentiae.

The investigation is to proceed on three levels:

a) A study of the impact of the cultural product: the impact of the picture, of the experiment, of the theory, of the "holy" text, of the ritual, of the behavioral act. The emphasis here is on the intention of the product and not of the producer. So far the common element. However, in the intention of the "product" the whole differential context is involved and thus historical relativism is implied.

b) The Geertzian question: "what the devil do they think they are doing?". This is an investigation of the representation that the actors-producers form in their mind as to what they are doing. This is clearly comparative and involves human cognitive universals as against context-dependent, discipline-dependent differentials.

c) Finally, the third level of investigation is a second type of representation: here we, the meta-level historians-researchers describe (i. e. represent) what we think that the actors-producers have in mind as to what they are doing.

It is clear even from this short description that a complex network of ideas in the body of knowledge, in a variety of disciplines, has to be woven into the fabric of Images of Knowledge and Second-Order Concepts, which are all part of the theoretical reflection on those bodies of knowledge.

The seminar in Comparative Epistemology indeed lasted the whole year. Whatever I described above about new ideas and approaches serving as irritant, took place with a vengeance in this seminar. Those who found great difficulties with — or even disliked the approach thoroughly, held very strong views about it and spent great effort in sharpening, refining and developing their opposition. I am sure the seminar had at least as much intellectual benefit for the opponents as it helped those of us who supported the basic approach, to clarify our thoughts and sharpen our arguments. I certainly do not claim that the participants got converted one way or the other, nor was it the aim, but the interesting observation is that during the entire year, the number of participants in those seminars remained around twenty at least, while originally we had planned it for only six or seven. Somehow, the wish to exchange ideas or even to be at odds with each other — albeit with growing intellectual finesse and with ever new examples, often from unexpected areas — kept our involvement unabated. For me at least, a different and I hope deeper formulation for a rationale of comparative epistemology emerged. Western capitalistic society reached its success due to a series of values: universalism, absolutism, positivism, scientism and relentless technological progress. With high probability the seemingly insoluble, global, social and environmental problems of this society are direct results of those very successes. It is at best questionable, if not downright wrong, to believe that the same type of natural and social science, the same methods, indeed the same values, can create the tools to solve those problems. It is my thesis that the problems can be tackled only by a new type of knowledge which is *contextual, relativistic, comparative and man-centered*.