



OUR LOCAL REALITIES: A CALL FOR COMPARATIVE CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

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Keywords: Hegelian vs. Kantian dialectics, development in history, á priori categories, inner moral code, cultural trap

Foreword

In the nineteen sixties a Bolivian student studying in Hungary fell in love with a Hungarian student, they got married and went to live in Bolivia. Soon they had children and the smaller one, a little boy suffered of ear troubles many times. Somehow the doctor's medicine hadn't proven to be successful. The Bolivian grandmother, who was considered by her Hungarian daughter-in-law as a sorceress, had never been permitted to use her power to heal him. But finally she was allowed to give a try since the boy got very ill. So she formed a cornet shape out of a newspaper and put the tip of it into his ear and lit the other end. As the paper burned the smoke and heat cleared his inflamed ear and he got much better. The mother used this method herself later on and it always relieved the pain.

Upon their return to Hungary the boy's ear inflamed again and this time the Hungarian grandmother proposed to take him to the doctor and have his ear punctured. But the mother quickly got a newspaper, formed the cornet shape, put it into his ear and lit it – and she almost had her son's full head burned down in seconds.

The clue was pretty obvious afterwards: the thin air in Bolivia, high above sea level made the paper burn slow, whereas in Budapest it flared up like a torch.

This story implies a whole variety of conclusions, even if we limit our framework to the relationship of man to reality.

Firstly, that we may learn both from accumulated knowledge and through our on trial and error experiences.

Secondly, that accumulated knowledge itself is a rather controversial mixture based on different concepts.

Thirdly, that some of these concepts are labelled – ever since, science' has been invented – as scientific while others as non-scientific, regardless of their relevance towards reality.

Fourthly, that education mediates these concepts and this way to a great extent influences both one's ideas about the world and one's practice in it.

Fifthly, that much of these concepts or at least numerous ideas and methods based on them are depending on time and space, which can be realized either as time passes or as they spread geographically.



Finally, from the point of view of a notion in understanding the world around us and our opportunities within it, there seems to be a need for a polyphonic approach, i.e. to be aware of as many concepts and approaches as possible, simultaneously.

This need has been the reason of mine of launching comparative philosophy, yet another concept which may not even be new, but nevertheless which aims at surpassing some of the limitations set by concepts framed within the time and space context of a given reality.

An Example: Madách and Kant

Imre Madách and his drama, *The Tragedy of Man* is not well known outside Hungary. Yet for the Hungarians some sentences of this drama would sound as proverbs. Written in 1859-60 by a well-educated nobleman who lived a rather secluded life on his estate, the drama's story is not less than travelling through the history of mankind with Adam, Eve and Lucifer from the Paradise to the extinction of mankind within the framing scenes where God and his angels express the Lord's notions.

Only a year after the fully unknown author sent the one and only manuscript of his drama to the leading poet as well as literary critic and organizer of his time, János Arany, a century-long literary debate was sparked in Hungary, including special sessions of the literary and historic department of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in the 1950-ies. As a modern critic puts it "Nobody beside Imre Madách has ever been received with either seemingly identical yet essentially controversial, or seemingly controversial yet essentially identical statements and value judgements" (András, 1983). Literary historians and critics draw parallels with the dramas of Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe and Byron or show resemblances with the ideals of some Hungarian poets like Kölcsey, Petőfi and Vörösmarty. When they search for the origin of Madách's ideas a rather long list of writers, thinkers and scientists is enlisted, including Hegel, Schelling, Feuerbach, Herodotos, Humboldt, Rousseau, August Comte, Ludwig Bücher, Carlyle, Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, Hogarth, Pascal, Fourier, Owen, Saint Simon, Lamarck, Lamartine, Ludwig Börne and Dickens.

Nevertheless when speaking about the history of mankind as described in the drama and the development reflected, most of the critics discuss it within the frameworks of Hegel's works. 'Undoubtedly the most he had learned from Hegel, who's philosophy reigned in those times' says Voinovich (1914) or "Madách has learned his historic way of seeing from Hegel" says Baranyi (1963) and there was even by an attempt by Radó (1964) to re-construct the historical scenes "in the sense of Hegelian dialectics" to get a "series of scenes of mathematical accuracy". However, if we would follow up this intention of going according to the Thesis - Antithesis - Synthesis triad along the drama as Radó proposed we would find that instead of a T-A-S pattern there is a somewhat peculiar T-A-S, A-T-A-A, S-A, S-A-A-A-A serial of "dialectic development". Others like Lengyel (1942), Demény (1946) or Martinkó (1978) respond to these statements by disproving that Madách would had followed Hegel in his philosophy of history, saying that he only picked the historical phases described in Hegel's *Vorlesungen* without following his concept of history. Probably the most knowledgeable expert on the topic, József Mezei comes to the conclusion that "Traditional content analyses show



the drama's philosophical message, the contemporary philosophical influences or even some eclectic creations and it is often claimed to be the illustration of Hegelian philosophy and methods. Also many times there were discovered the traces of Kantian reminiscences and those of the fights and compromises of neo-Hegelians and neo-Kantians. Yet philosophy can not be the only content of this poetic-dramatic piece, as the plot itself does not follow it either" (Mezei, 1977).

This latter statement could be acceptable for most of the dramas, yet we should quote Madách himself to disprove it. In 1842 Madách – at the age of 19 (!) – wrote an *Essay on Art*, which remained unpublished for many decades. Here he states, that "as all the fine arts conceive their objects in the idea of beauty and greatness, so should we grant the precondition that if a playwright grabs his pen, if he casts his enthusiasm into rolling action then his soul has been filled by the reverence for beauty and greatness and he writes an apology for these in the dramatic piece. We may set as a rule, that at all times the poet should adopt such an idea with the intention of praising it and also to lead it to victory although a hundred of obstacles would fight against it. - And this makes the moral plot of the play. This rule nevertheless applies to the historic drama as well, since it should be taken for the author that he would not enthusiastically create art about such an object which has no inherent moral beauty" (Madách, 1942).

Considering the above statement and the fact that nevertheless Madách followed this idea all in his other tragedies (*Mózes, Queen Mary, The Last Days of Csák*) we have to find another way of argumentation. His set of values – explicitly expressed in the quoted essay – reflect not only some general ideas inherent in the stream of enlightenment, but also strongly resemble the moral philosophy of Kant. Moreover, we can even characterize the heroes of *The Tragedy of Man* with the *á priori* categories as described by Kant in the first pages of the *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (Kant, 1787/1913). God and his representative on Earth, Eve can be characterized by unity /Einheit/, reality /Realität/, inherency and subsistence /der Inhärenz und Subsistenz/, possibility and impossibility /Möglichkeit - Unmöglichkeit/ (as the Choir of Angels says: "He is the unity of power, knowledge and beauty") Lucifer represents multitude /Vielheit/, negation /Negation/ ("the ancient spirit of negation"), causality and dependency /der Kausalität und Dependenz/, existence and non-existence /Dasein - Nichtsein/ while Adam can be described with all /Allheit/ ("And to be the lord of all"), limitation /Limitation/ ("You'll be limited by brief existence"), community, the interaction between the active and the passive /der Gemeinschaft, Wechselwirkung zwischen dem Handelnden und Leidenden/ and with necessity and the incidental /Notwendigkeit - Zufälligkeit/ ("If Luther would have become the Pope / and Leo a professor at some German University?").

To identify characters with philosophical categories would be undoubtedly a rather suspicious venture unless we can show that this is the key and starting point of the new way of argumentation mentioned earlier. If we allow that the heroes represent a set of categories the very idea of synthesis becomes invalid in the context of *The Tragedy of Man*. The heroes follow their own rules and they can never take sides. The difference of understanding the drama this way lies in the difference of the concept of dialectics of Kant and that of Hegel. Speaking about methods in logic, Kant states, that "the general logic, if considered as an organon is always the logic of the appearance, i.e. dialectical" (Kant, 1787/1913), while Hegel describes his method as "the only true



method" because it is not distinct from its content itself since "the dialectics, which is contained within moves this content ahead" (Hegel, 1812/1979). All through *The Tragedy of Man Lucifer* acts and talks according to the "dialectic of appearance" while the drama itself lacks the dialectics of the content, i.e. a dialectical development of the history of mankind or the same of Adam. The main plot is around moral questions, regardless of any given historical period and social formation. Moreover, this static moral commitment is expressed by Adam himself as he teaches his pupil in the second Prague scene: "The one who has power and God within... Will create new rules with his art" - a statement very close to Kant's rule-creating concept of categorical imperative.

A more pragmatic investigation into the possible influences on Madách would also surely point out, that his library which contained about 1200 volumes from Plutarch to Ludwig Feuerbach, from Sophocles to Victor Hugo and from Martin Luther to Alexander Humboldt nevertheless did not contain any volumes from Hegel but it had the 1787 edition of Kant's *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*.

There is no reason to deny that some literary historians have mentioned Kant as they discussed the *Tragedy*, yet they say that these are more or less just similarities which are either the conclusions of the author's own experiences (Galamb, 1917; Barta, 1942) or arrived through the filter of freemasonry movement (Hermann, 1974). It seems to be, however, somewhat peculiar that the only critics claiming a more significant Kantian influence were all from outside Hungary. The Italian Antonio Mazzuchetti in 1908 described the *Tragedy* as the history-in-dream of the vices and virtues, weaknesses and energies of Adam – i.e. of the mankind, based on a Kantian influence. The American Dieter P. Lotze devoted more than two pages in his book to this influence, stating not less, then "the three basic questions Kant raises are the same that Adam asks after his dream visions: 'What can I know? What ought I do? What may I hope?...' And the final angelic choir assures man that he has indeed a free choice. Madách, like Kant, sees freedom as the prerequisite for ethical action" and later on Lotze says "The Lord in Madách's drama seems to agree with Kant that this certainty (i.e. any promise) would decrease the moral value of our action... As Kant, this uncertainty is seen as a gift to mankind... Ethical action should spring from the inner moral code without regard to compensation in this world or the next" (Lotze, 1981). Yet his rather powerful statements got nothing but a mention without comment in the comprehensive study on Madách (Horváth, 1984).

The influence of Kant's philosophy is even more apparent if we trace back the original version of the *Tragedy* (Striker, 1986) where the text follows much more strictly the ideas of Madách described in his *Essay on Art* quoted earlier. It is very likely, however, that all critics, including the foreign ones used the version improved by Károly Szász and most of all by János Arany partly with the approval of the author himself. What could be the reason for forming this tradition of Hegelian or else explanation and the avoidance of mentioning Kant as a basic source and background?

It is pointless to question the critics' erudition. On the contrary, it has been exactly their erudition which has limited them in their investigations in this case. They approached the *Tragedy* as a scientist should do: within the framework of reference of the Hungarian culture and history. They took it for granted that for Adam - and for us here in Hungary - freedom and morals should come first even when it comes to power, love or the arts



and moreover, that Lucifer, the devil - within his own sphere - can not be else than also a basically honest and reliable person. Yet some others, having been brought up in other cultures point out with ease the strong Kantian influence prevalent in the moral concept of the *Tragedy*, as they would probably depict the same in most of the outstanding pieces of the Hungarian literature ever since.

Conclusions – Local Reality i. e. Local Science?

At this point the universal nature of science is being questioned. It would be hard to deny, that within the science of psychology Freud and his followers investigate the territories of consciousness before action itself i.e. the origins (the input), while the school of behaviourism, a child of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, deals with the presumably goal-oriented, rational activities and behaviour, i.e. the outcome (the output) thus reflecting the rather inactive, inward-looking attitude of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Central Europe and the active, expanding Anglo-Saxon culture, respectively.

As the mathematician János Neumann is rightly quoted by historians of science, “we may soundly postulate that logic and mathematics are also of historical origin and of accidental forms of expressions (as languages). There may be essentially different variants of logic and mathematics - they both may exist in other forms than we have got used to!” (*D. Nagy-F. Nagy*, 1986). Contrary to theories of science which deem that the development of natural sciences and mathematics are determined by intrinsic factors, Michael Polanyi and his circle opened up the horizon towards a sociology of scientific knowledge, launching their own specific approach of research on the influence of the societies on scientific activities (*Nye*, 2011). Cross-cultural comparison of morals is of specific focus for anthropologists, one of the most popular example of which is the amusing re-assessment of the moral frameworks of the Shakespeare’s Hamlet by the Tiv of Nigeria, with the – by now widely quoted – final advice of the local chief to its ‘story teller’, the cultural anthropologist Laura Bohannan : “ ‘Sometime,’ concluded the old man, gathering his ragged toga about him, ‘you must tell us some more stories of your country. We, who are elders, will instruct you in their true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and who have taught you wisdom’ ” (*Bohannan*, 1966). The Scottish philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre also talks about the lack of neutral moral standards, emphasising that morals and virtues are to be comprehended in relation to the community in which they are observed. (*MacIntyre*, 1984). Referring to the dislocation of personal methods and solutions quoted in the Bolivian example in the introduction of the present paper one could add – somewhat in line with MacIntyre’s theory – that while vegetarian diet is followed by approximately one third of the population of India, a vegetarian in a rural Hungarian community is simply considered an oddball if not a troublemaker.

Yet here we would not follow the notion of relativism, i.e. to question the objectivity of science on the whole. On the contrary, we would like to propose that it would be not in vain to investigate scientific trends – as well as other cultural phenomena like the arts, politics, etc. – as reflections of local realities. Postulating that all groups of human beings, be them nations, states or cultures have set the task of survival we would give grounds for a comparative investigation where the respective answers



could be compared to obtain characteristics which remained unrevealed by other methods. Ideas to some extent reflect their local realities; therefore these realities could be better understood by analysing the ideas as well. If one takes the seemingly arbitrary comparison of the Papal State of the 1500ies to the Stalinist Soviet Union of the mid 1930ies one easily finds similarities e.g. in the respective use of undoubtedly positive and egalitarian ideologies (Christianity and communism) within dictatorial political frameworks of unchallengeable power which, nevertheless, both projected happiness for all into the future and restricted political participation and information for their common people to a minimum (i.e. to worshipping).

However, those basic elements and correlations of social life and human creativity which would allow this comparative investigation are still to be carefully selected. The Russian chemist Mendeleev found the essential characteristics of chemical elements to have them arranged accordingly into a grid to get a guideline for chemistry and for physics. His chart has proven to be forecasting chemical elements yet unknown at his own age. There is the question, however, whether philosophy could undertake a similar role to interpret cultures and societies yet unseen and unexperienced.



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