

Contributions To Phenomenology 77

Thomas M. Seebohm

# History as a Science and the System of the Sciences

Phenomenological Investigations

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Thomas M. Seebohm

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Thomas M. Seebohm (deceased)  
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# Preface

A modern Socrates walking around in the marketplace of opinion that is offered in the modern media will soon discover that very few dare to raise objections against arguments starting with “science has shown that . . . .” What “science” says is considered to be the final decider in the court of reason that determines the answers for all questions that can be raised both in the region of theoretical knowledge and in the region of technological solutions for practical problems. Such arguments presuppose, of course, that it is known what a science is or ought to be. And the Socratic question in this situation is, of course, “Tell me, dear friend, what science is.” The experts for answers to this question in the last century, i.e., the epistemologists, offered two answers. Further Socratic questioning reveals that diametrically opposed conclusions can be derived from the two answers.

The first answer is the answer of analytic philosophy, the modern version of nineteenth century positivism. The answer is that sciences are real sciences only if they are able to apply the methods of experimental research based on immediate intersensory observations,<sup>1</sup> and in addition they are real sciences only to the degree in which they are also to apply mathematics. Only real sciences in this sense are able to discover the laws of nature and to determine how things *really* are. The natural sciences are sciences of the real world, i.e., of nature. The so-called human sciences are sciences only to the degree to which they are able first to apply methods of natural sciences and then, in a second step, to give reductive explanations for their discoveries with the support of results from the natural sciences. This is the final conclusion of the first answer.

The second answer distinguishes between the methods of the natural sciences and those of the human sciences. Human sciences apply the methods of understanding (*Verstehen*), i.e., of the interpretation of the manifestations, the life expressions, in the cultural world. Natural sciences are sciences that apply the methods of explanation and as nomothetic sciences they are interested in the discovery of causal

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<sup>1</sup>Note that in these investigations the term “intersensory” always refers to observation that is not merely sensory but intersubjective.

laws determining the events in the natural world of what really is the case. There are, hence, *prima facie* in general no serious differences in the judgments about the methodology of the natural sciences between the defenders of the first and the second answer. A second glance reveals, however, that the thesis of the defenders of the second answer implies that the world of the human sciences, the cultural world, has priority over the world of the natural sciences. This needs some further explication.

The main objection that can be raised in defense of the second against the first answer is that explanations in the human sciences have to presuppose what has to be explained. What has to be explained are manifestations of cultural activities, i.e., actions, interactions, speeches, but then also written speeches, texts, art works, etc. Such manifestations are more than objects that can be given in intersensory observations. They must be understood, i.e., they need interpretations. Explanations in the human or cultural sciences presuppose, hence, interpretations. There is no way to defend the objective validity of such explanations without a possible justification of the objective validity of the presupposed interpretations with the aid of methods that can serve as warrants for the objective validity of these interpretations.

The conclusion that can be derived from the principles of this argument for the second answer says that the history of the natural sciences shows that the natural sciences themselves are also manifestations of specific activities in specific phases of cultural history. The natural sciences can, hence, ultimately be reduced to the problem of understanding interpretations of nature in the human sciences. This conclusion is diametrically opposed to the conclusion that is derivable from the first answer.

However, this argument also reveals the weak spot in the second answer. There is, on the one hand, philology as *the* historical human science that can be recognized as a “pure” science of interpretation. There are, on the other hand, historical human sciences that *presuppose* interpretations of texts, monuments, and artifacts, but their main interest ultimately lies in reconstructions of “what really happened” and explanations of “why has it happened,” i.e., an interest in “historical” facts and causal explanations of these facts. It is, hence, possible to maintain a strict distinction between a scientific methodology of explanation and a scientific methodology of interpretation, but it is not possible to use this distinction between different methodologies as a justification for a strict separation between the natural and the human sciences.

A reader of the second volume of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, with the subtitle *Investigations Pertaining to the Phenomenology and Theory of Knowledge*, as well as the *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I*, is left with the impression that phenomenological investigations will be able to give a consistent and final answer to the question of what a science really is and to offer an outline of a system of different types of theoretical disciplines that can be recognized as sciences. Looking then into *Ideas II* and the later works of Husserl, the reader is left, however, with the somewhat disappointing impression that Husserl obviously shares the above-mentioned second answer, emphasizing a transcendental and even metaphysical priority of the world



of the cultural or spiritual sciences over the world of the natural sciences. It is also disappointing to discover that, though Husserl offers a general theory of knowledge and a philosophy of science, he says almost nothing about a phenomenological epistemology of the sciences and a system of the sciences, i.e., what is missing are critical descriptive analyses of the *methodologies* of the sciences.

Phenomenology is not a doctrine or a closed philosophical system. It is, according to Husserl, a research program. Having the above-mentioned incompatibilities, shortcomings, and doubts in mind, it is, hence, the aim of the following investigations to develop a consistent system of a phenomenological epistemology. The expectation that such investigations should begin with the natural sciences is reasonable. It is reasonable because seen from the viewpoint of the history of the sciences, it is obvious that the development of the modern empirical sciences begins with the emergence of the natural sciences and that the claim that the so-called human sciences are indeed sciences was only raised later, first for the historical human sciences and then for psychology and the social human sciences. The summary of the conclusion at the end of the following investigation will follow this order. But the *methodology of research in history as a science*—not history as a collection of narratives—and in the *historical human sciences* has been a blind spot in phenomenological epistemological reflections. Therefore, the investigation (Part I, Sect. 4.5; Part II, Chap. 5) will begin with the epistemological problems of the historical human sciences, proceed from there to the *prima facie* diametrically opposed problems of the natural sciences, and deal with psychology and the social human sciences at the end.

This outline of the system of the sciences, and the additional thesis that *history as a science* is the mediator in the alleged opposition of the natural and the human sciences, is incompatible with both of the considered above answers to the question “what is a science.” It is, however, in agreement both with our lived experience in a lifeworld with sciences and with the foundations of a lifeworld with sciences in the structure of practical interactions with the natural environment in pre-scientific lifeworlds (Part I, Sect. 3.5; Part II, Chap. 6; Part IV, Chap. 9).

Thomas M. Seebohm



# Acknowledgements

Given the circumstances, the research work preparing the investigations of this book would not have been possible without the continuing supply of recent publications and information about editions of the phenomenological traditions in the United States (especially the tradition of the New School, Dorion Cairns, Felix Kaufmann, Aron Gurwitsch, and Alfred Schutz, provided by Lester Embree) and the “Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, Inc.” Embree read also drafts of chapters of the book and gave valuable advice for the technical terminology and the general structure of the whole.<sup>1</sup> I highly appreciate and am thankful for Dr. Elizabeth Behnke’s work as copyeditor of the book, including her advice for polishing the style and editorial problems in the bibliography. I am also very thankful for the support in finding solutions for technical problems and the formatting of the text of my technical advisor Michael Rang. I appreciate and I am thankful for the decision of the editorial board and the editors of the Contributions to Phenomenology series and to the publisher, Springer, for accepting and publishing the book.

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<sup>1</sup>Before he became ill, my friend sent me a printout of the whole of his book. I marked a number of typographical errors and suggested divisions of some long paragraphs and sent it back. When I was sadly honored with the request to see the work though the press, this marked-up copy was sent back to me and showed not only that most of the suggested divisions and corrections were accepted but also that some errors I had overlooked had been caught by the author. After making these corrections, all that the text lacked were abstracts for the chapters. Here I soon gave up composing them myself and instead have formed the abstracts out of the section headings within the chapters. I am grateful to my assistant, Elliot Shaw for his help. Lester Embree, July 2014.



# Obituary

Thomas M. Seebohm

Thomas Mulvany Seebohm died at home in Bonn surrounded by his wife and three sons on August 25. He was born on July 7, 1934 in Gleiwitz.

Due in part to the times in Germany after the war, after graduating in classical gymnasium in 1952, he learned cabinetmaking, becoming a journeyman in 1954. He then studied Philosophy, Slavic Languages, Slavonic Literature, and Sociology at the Universities of Bonn, Saarbrücken, and Mainz, receiving his doctorate in Philosophy *summa cum laude* in 1960 with *Die Bedingungen der Möglichkeit der Transzendentalphilosophie* (Bonn 1962). From 1960 to 1965 he studied medieval Russian philosophy and culture further, eventually publishing *Ratio und Charisma. Ansatz zur Ausbildung eines philosophisches und wissenschaftlichen Weltverständnisses im Moskauer Russland* (Bonn 1977).

Seebohm began teaching as an Assistant at Mainz in 1965, and was a Visiting Professor at the Pennsylvania State University in 1970–1972 and at Trier in 1973. He was then a Full Professor at Penn State 1973–1984, with additional visiting professorships at the New School for Social Research in 1980 and at Heidelberg in 1981. He was a Director of the Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, Inc. since the 1970s. And finally he returned to Mainz as the successor of Gerhard Funke in 1984 and retired in 1999.

Further books are *Zur Kritik der hermeneutischen Vernunft* (Bonn 1972), *Philosophie der Logik. Handbuch Philosophie* (Freiburg 1984), *Elementare formalisierte Logik* (Freiburg 1991), *Hermeneutics: Method and Methodology* (Dordrecht 2004), and, finally, a comprehensive phenomenological epistemology, *History as a Science and the System of the Sciences* (Dordrecht, in press).

There is a Festschrift, *Phenomenology on Kant, German Idealism, Hermeneutics, and Logic* (ed. O.K. Wiegand et al., Dordrecht: 2000), with an Introduction by Joseph Kockelmans on the accomplishments until then that fit that title and that made Thomas cry when he read it. Kockelmans's summary is that, "above all Seebohm considered himself a creative phenomenologist who as a critically reflecting

philosopher would look at all major issues with which he became confronted from a transcendental point of view” (p. 3). From helping with the last book, I can add that Thomas also found a final affinity with the New School tendency in American phenomenology, i.e., Dorion Cairns, Aron Gurwitsch, and Alfred Schutz.

Lester Embree

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