Justification, Truth, and Belief
http://www.jtb-forum.pl
February 2002

Under its ‘classical’ definition, going back to Plato, knowledge is a set of justified true beliefs, in symbols, \( K = JTB \). This explains the name JTB-FORUM of this eJournal.

What is JTB?

JTB-FORUM is meant to be a place for sharing queries, problems and research ideas relevant for a broadly understood theory of knowledge. Short notes about events that might be of interest for the people involved in research activities relevant to the scope of JTB-FORUM are also welcome.

A text to be publicized via JTB-FORUM should be electronically submitted (preferably in the form of a TXT file) to any of the Managing Editors of the forum. It should take the form of a few page essay or note. The managing editor will accept (or reject) the submitted material on the basis of her/his personal judgement of both the quality and clarity of the presentation.

Things published at JTB-FORUM might be submitted (in their original or revised form) for publication to any regular journal. No permission is required. The author is requested to mention the fact that JTB-FORUM was the place where the ideas of the paper were initially exhibited.

Find more or contact us on JTB-FORUM web site: http://www.jtb-forum.pl

RENATA ZYCH

Foundationalism in Archeology
And The Postmodernist Turn

The Humanities are struggling with many problems that are the result of the postmodernist turn. Most modernists desired to make humanities more scientific. The ideal of scientific cognition was that of looking for truth and objectiveness in a rational way. The world was conceived of as realistic and objective. The aim of modern science was to reach the truth about the world. Postmodernism puts forward completely different assumptions and aims. First of all, it throws aside the possibility of immediate cognition of the world. There are only interpretations of the world, our images of the world. For postmodernists, not objectivism but constructivism is the way of understanding reality. They throw aside endeavouring to objectiveness for the benefit of relativism. They also claim that humanist knowledge does not
belong to science but is closer to literature or art. It is also to perform similar tasks to those of literature and art such as propagation of values or auto-creation of the individual. Thus, they criticise each kind of foundationalism.

I think the acceptance of some form of foundationalism is what distinguishes humanities as a science from art, loose narration and so on.

In history of philosophy, the term foundationalism has been understood in many ways. What it meant depended on the historical period, type of foundationalism and the domain of existence. Generally, we can distinguish a whole range of its types, from weak foundationalism, through moderate, to extreme. Differences between them concern the distinguishing conditions of the basic sentences as well as relations between them and the nonbasic sentences, which are accepted on the grounds of the basic sentences. As its moderate form, we can accept the type “which postulates a tightly hierarchical structure of science which is well ordered in terms of distinguishing basic sentences, ie. those sentences which are not justified by any other sentences, but which justify themselves and with which the process of justification ends, and nonbasic sentences, which are accepted on the basis of basic sentences”. The basic sentences are not infallible, they should only perform their cognitive function as basic sentences, in other words, sentences whose truthfulness is not to proved by other sentences. I consider this type of foundationalism as the one whose acceptance in the humanities makes them different from pseudoscience (postmodernism considered the humanities to be pseudoscience).

Does contemporary archaeology belong to the humanities? In archaeology the empirical base is made up of a catalogued collection of data, which is described by observational (basic) sentences. The basic requirement in archaeology is qualifying time and space as well as the precise location of data in relation to both other artefacts and the natural environment. The analysis, systematisation and classification of data have become very advanced. Description is commonly accepted as in the first place a description of the artefact in terms of its form. The artefact is treated here as a physical thing, which has some shape, size, mass, colour and so on. This kind of description, thanks to its intersubjectivity, acquires the character of objectiveness and has a basic, fundamental meaning. So artefacts exist really, objectively. Data are also described in terms of their function, (way of use, meaning) which flows from their form. Thus, these

---

2 Ibid.
descriptions refer to a factual, primeval reality, a reality existing objectively. Archaeologists also often advance results of scientific investigations which are considered to be objective. This is done in order to underpin or to support the objectiveness of archaeological research. The results of scientific investigations referring to the changes in the environment in prehistory supply the archaeologists with an important context to the investigation of the cultural events. S. Hansen’s *Jaettestuer i Danmark. Konstruktion og restaurering* is an example of this procedure. The author of this book presents the architecture of passage graves from the Neolithic period, 4th and 5th millennium BC. It refers to their construction and restoration. It is a work rich in information and observations concerning these constructions but neither their significance nor their symbolic value are mentioned there. The author concentrates only on the constructive aspects. He emphasises that buildings of this type had to be raised by people of advanced skills, possessing the knowledge of technical solutions, static principles, and so on. This work also contains scientific analysis, thanks to which it has been ascertained that the landscape surrounding the tombs was the result of human agricultural activity. Thus, this is the reconstruction of the objective, true reality.

It is obvious that, similarly to other scientific disciplines, there are also different theoretical perspectives in contemporary archaeology. They suggest many possible ways in which we can treat the past. One of them is cultural-historical archaeology (so-called traditional archaeology) with a positivist attitude, which gives special importance to data and expresses it explicitly. This model is generally based on the inductive explanation, it prefers collecting and observation of “clear sources” not burdened with theoretical assumptions. Thus, presenting prehistorical reality is supported by a hard source base. Objectively existing reality is the subject of research. Completely different assumptions direct process archaeology (new archaeology), whose attitude towards traditional archaeology is critical. The main aim of the new archaeology is to create synthesis and laws, to show processes and mechanisms that can be observed in human societies. Process archaeology accepts the deductive-nomological strategy of explanation to solve these problems. Its attitude towards cultural activity is rather synchronous then diachronic. Nevertheless, emphasising the need for the creation of theory, the process archaeologists try to connect the theories closely to concrete data, facts. Besides, theory is based on an endeavour to approach objective truth. This is a result of process archaeologists’ endeavours to make archaeology more scientific, thereby achieving for it a

---


similar status to that which natural sciences have. This would allow the
creation of laws and generalisations.

Nowadays, we can notice some influences of postmodernism in
archaeology, which (as I stated above) opposes every form of
foundationalism, so also this moderate version that I consider to be
necessary for distinguishing science (humanities) from literature or
speculation. Neither objective reality nor the one correct interpretation of
the world exists for postmodernists. There are only images about them.
Since we cannot cognise the objective reality that we live in, we also cannot
cognise the objective reality of prehistory. Only the free interpretations of
scientists are possible. They are restricted only by coordination, assignations
being a result of conversation. The mind is not able to cognise the reality
objectively, cognising is culturally conditioned and is based on a certain
vision of the world.

What do the archaeologists think about this? It is difficult to generalise.
It can be said that most archaeologists are in favour of the realist vision of
prehistory. However, some of them state that such a vision of the objective
truth of prehistory is unjustified. They indicate contemporary humanities
which are based on the conviction that scientists construct the pictures of the
past which are only their pictures and truths. Archaeologists are involved in
their own culture, so their relation to the past is the relation between one
culture and another. They believe, that “it is necessary to throw away a
naive conviction that the past as a subject of our research exists objectively
or can be empirically investigated.”

Postmodernist ideas were reflected in the so-called postprocess
(contextual) archaeology, which is represented among others by Ian Hodder.
In an investigative process the postprocess archaeologists make use of both
the deductive and inductive models of explanation. Here, the primary
element of investigative process is not the individual components but the
structures, systems. The observational layer of cultural reality is treated as a
sign of certain essences of the hidden structures. The attainment of the
essences of cultural significance is one of the main cognitive tasks for this
type of archaeology. The significance can be read by reference to context.
But these significances can be different, variable and the denotation of the
notion of the context is infinite and depends on the questions that are put by
the scientist in relation to the artefacts. Hodder distinguishes two kinds of
significations: the first one contains “structured system of functional
correlations”, the second one contains “structured essence of ideas and
symbols.” Thus, the first significance refers to the function of artefact and

---

6 J. Ostoja-Zagórski, „Czy istnieje obiektywna prawda o pradziejach?”, Archeologia Polski, 1995,
z. 1-2, pp. 162-165.
results from its form. The second one refers to the symbolic sphere. So, material culture is significantly constituted. It means that the archaeological sources can be treated as a text which can be read. The symbolic significance of the thing is the result of abstracting from the whole of its relations with other data. The abstractive significance is derived from all possible associations and contrasts, resemblances and differences. The investigation of symbolic significance has to be based on abstracting and theory. It is necessary to know as much data as possible as well as the relations between the things and then, to fit the theory to the data. There is no one particular description, one adequate explanation. A given thing can have different significances (even contradictory ones) in relation to the perspective which was accepted by different groups in the society as well as different individuals and the context in which it exists. Besides, an archaeologist overlays a significance of his own culture on a primeval situation, his views, assumptions and his own knowledge about the past. Does this conception radically stray from the former, realist ones? It seems that it does but it only seems. In fact, it is “the couching into a frame of conception the notorious archaeologist practice, who after all, always have pursued such conceived contextual archaeology, … realist philosophy can be recovered in that viewpoint from which the scientists (among them historians and archaeologists) reconstruct the past”.

Thus, also this time, archaeology does not escape the realist vision of the world. Formulation of prehistory as the objective reality, reality as such, is closer rather to philosophical considerations then to considerations of other humanities having an ambiguous reality as their subject of interpretation. Why is such a philosophical attitude present in archaeology? Perhaps, the reason is that “there are not many human interests that would be so wholesome and philosophically disposing as archaeology.”

Visit us: http://www.jtb-forum.pl

---

8 Ibid. p. 156.
9 Ibid. p. 177.
10 J. Topolski, „O interpretacji i nadinterpretacji w archeologii”, in: Archeologia w teorii i praktyce, A. Buko, P. Urbańczyk (eds.), Warsaw 2000, p. 79.