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Science and humanizing of society[*]

At the beginning there was curiosity

A human being is curious by nature. Moreover, humans attempt to make use of things that their curiosity has discovered. Knowledge, at the beginning of which was curiosity, converts itself into a process of learning, i. e. the utilisation or transformation of knowledge gained into generalised knowledge. This process leads and enables humans to change their environment – both social and cultural as well as material environment, stemming from their natural environment.

Pragmatic necessity

The incentive to develop knowledge resulted, to a great extent, from the pragmatic necessity to survive as an individual, a social group or a broader society.

Acquiring skills and the process of learning

Humans understood that acquiring skills and learning as such could help them to better form their life and environment according to their visions. Learning also creates better conditions for asserting oneself in the social system. However, it does not necessarily lead to an easier life since knowledge also brings about a greater awareness of limitations present in life as well as an awareness of the competitiveness of the social environment.

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Understanding the advantages of „knowing"

Understanding the advantages of knowing can have a positive impact on the development of human society as well as negative consequences. In other words, knowledge can be both used and misused – which mirrors both humans' strengths and weaknesses. Despite the continuous spread of education and its rising accessibility to ever wider masses of the population, the ability „to know" still remains somewhat exceptional.

The systematisation of knowledge – science

This exceptionality is connected to the systematisation of knowledge, which requires special procedures, methods as well as abilities to make generalisations. It is connected to scientific knowledge. Science is – figuratively, but also literally – a higher stage of „curiosity".

Science and the development of civilisation

As a higher stage of knowledge, it is science, and scientific procedures, that is connected to the development of civilisation. Inventions in technology, engineering, physical or chemical processes, the discovery of the natural regularities and forms of life, and the revelation of the mysteries of space have moved humans forward. Thank to their applicability, they have also been transformed to accommodate the needs of everyday life and been useful in and for our day-to-day life. The reflexivity of the social environment has always constituted an intrinsic part of the learning process. This has also been translated into a struggle to scientifically comprehend the varieties of functioning of social systems, ranging from small social groups to complex social systems, of which humans have historically been part. Regularities, rules, hierarchic and functional structuralisation, systems of power and social control, cultural systems – all these complex structures have been the object of scientific reflexivity in various ways. Due to the education system, knowledge of regularities and rules has become a part of human self-understanding. They influence our values, and our perception and comprehension of the social world. However, this gives rise to one of the ever-present problems that science has always had to deal with: knowledge and discoveries can lead to social progress but can also be misused.

Between service and temptation

One could say that throughout the history of scientific thinking, either in the ancient world, the Middle ages or modern times, there have been situations, recorded and/or evident, when knowledge – either deliberately, through coercion, or unwittingly – has served political interests, or the interests of power. Knowledge and science have always been dependent on their sources – primarily financial. This kind of sponsorship has usually not been a disinterested donation. Most of the time, it has been dominated by an interest to use the knowledge and its applications (to use contemporary vocabulary) for the reinforcement of power positions of certain social groups. Often, this has occurred within the sphere of the army and the arms industry, but also in the area of technological achievements, and the governance of natural resources that could bolster the power position of ruling social systems. In this respect, the socio-political sphere is also very sensitive. Whenever knowledge has threatened dominating ideologies and their respective interests, the retainers of such knowledge became endangered. History provides numerous examples. This „conflict of interests" has sometimes lead to a loss of life (or a threatened loss of life), to ostracism of those who hold undesirable knowledge, to marginalisation, disparagement or the questioning of the expert value of that knowledge. Nevertheless, one cannot stop the growth of knowledge. At most, the spread of knowledge and its applications can only be slowed by various means. The level of humanism and democracy in a society is also manifested in how knowledge, and scientific knowledge in particular, are dealt with, and whether knowledge is treated as a value that can both shape our perspective on the world we live in and also practically improve human everyday life. Therefore, attempts have been made – through the UNESCO programmes, for example – to enforce so-called ***policy oriented research***, especially in areas dealing with current problems in our civilization. This includes programmes focused on environmental problems, such as climate change. In addition to the environment, there are programmes aimed at the issues of human and civil rights, gender-related issues, inter-ethnic and inter-cultural relations, conflict resolutions, or xenophobia. Within all of those fields, science, in partnership with political or power structures, tries to suggest solutions. Another part of this humanistic trend consists of programmes focused on the issues of culture, cultural heritage, inter-cultural communication and so on.

However, there is also another side of science and scientific knowledge that has to be addressed. This is related to ethics as a regulator of scientific knowl-

edge. The ethics of scientific knowledge, as a value, shapes the relation of science and scientific knowledge to power. At the same time, it acts as a regulator or filter of the temptations which stem from human character and its shortcomings, and from which scientists are not exempt. History, including very recent history, records examples of personal failures resulting from the effort „to be the first", or „to be the best". These include attempts to make „improper shortcuts" to achieve success, which are especially prevalent in today's atmosphere of competitiveness (rooted in commerce), which dominates the world of science to an increasing extent. These issues are related to knowledge and scientific knowledge as cultural values contributing to the humanizing of our society. These are the issues which are increasingly discussed within the scientific community and have also been included in the programme of The First World Congress of Social Sciences which took place this year at the beginning of June in Bergen, Norway.