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Conceptual Clarity and Blurred Vision

Details in Early Modern and Romantic Thinking

Abstract

One of the main theses of Early Modern empirical thinking is the idea that knowledge is based on the accumulation of details. The most important vehicle of this epistemology of small things is considered to be individual and repeated observation. Distinct visual perception (and not the study of texts) is supposed to provide objective access to those things because—according, for example, to Francis Bacon—it is less influenced by cultural and social prejudices and discourses. At the same time, the simple accumulation of details is criticized (by Bacon too) because of its lack of discrimination and thus requires a trained observing eye and an organized, self-reflexive mind. This endeavor to deal with the blurring effects of details shapes the discourse about perception, cognition and knowledge throughout the 17th and 18th century that transcends the limits of natural science and affects the area of philosophical, sociological (pedagogical) and artistic theories. Different ways of arranging the world and teaching and learning the ‘right’ way to perceive are developed. Often they imagine a chronological starting point of perception (Locke, Condillac, Molyneux’ problem) and try to reconstruct its development step-by-step. Confronted by the blurring effects of details, human perception takes part in one of the most interesting paradoxes of Enlightenment thinking: the human being is simultaneously an individual, subjective person as well as the most important object of statistical enquiry.

In our workshop we will explore this paradox, and the reaction to this paradox, through the so-called German Classics and German Romantics. We will consider whether the attempted retreat to an absolute subjectivity and the rejection of a technical, objective, and statistical worldview addresses this paradox of the Enlightenment or whether it was just a reaction to the—probably false—claim that Enlightenment is merely concerned with measuring and objectifying the world? One must also take into account the fact that while rejecting this paradox of the Enlightenment the Romantics exhibit one of their own: They reject the technical, objective world through the most technologically advanced form of publication: journals. Furthermore it must be wondered to what extent the successors of Enlightenment actually juxtaposed subjectivity and objectivity and to what extent this is simply an invention of 20th century historians?