

interested in history, psychology, psychiatry and sociology.

**Sarah York,**  
University College Dublin

**Roger Smith,** *Being Human: Historical Knowledge and the Creation of Human Nature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. viii + 288, £25.00, hardback, ISBN: 978-0-7190-7498-1.

*Being Human* is a masterful argument for the value and necessity of the human sciences and of their history. In a reflexive dialogue with a long Continental tradition, from Giambattista Vico to Hans-Georg Gadamer, Smith makes a case for the human sciences *qua* sciences proper. This requires some qualification for the English reader, to whom ‘science’ normally means ‘natural science’, whilst Smith employs it in the non-disciplinary sense of the original *scientia*. In a nutshell, the argument is that human sciences are sciences just as much as the natural ones, that they are defined by different purposes – not objects or methods – and that they are constitutively historical and moral. The human sciences are, in principle as in practice, irreducible to the natural ones – indeed, the opposite argument emerges throughout the book. Their legitimacy is grounded on their intrinsically reflexive character – as opposed to the extrinsic ‘reflectivity’ of the natural sciences – that expresses itself in the specificity of their object (the concrete, historical making of being human) and in their dialogical, hermeneutic approach. There is no place out of history. Thus, materialistic and naturalistic claims to ‘exclusive access’ (p. 7), to knowledge about what is human, are simply declared as ‘mistaken’, on grounds that being human is not about possessing a nature, rather it is a reflexive act engaging the past, present and future in a moral process of self-formation. ‘Human’, Smith argues, is a moral category, defined in and by its making. That is

why the human sciences do not, and cannot, constitute a disciplinary form of knowledge, but ‘[create] a social space where disciplines seek to co-operate’ (p. 213). *All* sciences that have a bearing on being human can be human sciences, provided that their own historicity is acknowledged, and with it, the necessity of multiple perspectives on being human.

*Being Human* can be read as an argument for historical science as the pinnacle of knowledge, the science of all sciences in their concrete becoming. Smith seeks to avoid this by constant reference to a multiplicity of legitimate knowledges, serving different contingent purposes. This leads to some complications. First, the problem of the epistemological relations among the sciences: one cannot see how the human sciences, in this context, can ever be open to any input from the natural sciences. ‘Indeed, knowledge of nature needs reinterpretation in the light of knowledge of people, not vice versa’ (p. 13). Much as the multiplicity of the approaches is stressed, again, as inherent to the concept of human sciences, a hierarchy of knowledge unfolds through the book, reminiscent of Croce’s absolute historicism (which Smith does not address). Second, the reference to different values and interests grounding the multiplicity of perspectives opens up a related, if different problem: that of the concrete historical relations of the natural and human sciences. Smith does not address this issue systematically, although at all critical points but one he makes enlightening references to the institutional and political dimensions of these boundary disputes. Where he fails to provide this contextualisation is in relation to the present. The Humboldtian university, which provided the blueprint for the disciplinary and professional organisation of knowledge, was consubstantial to the ideal of *Bildung*. That model has come to a crisis: the scientific disciplines are dissolving into interdisciplinary fields, while the criteria of productivity and significance of the natural sciences, together with their organisation of labour, are being extended to all education and knowledge production. The historical sciences

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of the human, therefore, find themselves logically superordinate, for the dignity of their object and their bearing at once theoretical and moral, but actually subordinate, being evaluated on grounds they cannot share.

Smith makes a brave and timely move in showing that the sciences of being human are logically sound and, moreover, epistemologically and morally necessary as sciences of *anthropopoiesis*, generation of meaning and value. But the fact that all

sciences have a value-based foundation says nothing about the relative force of these values, and of their concrete, ideal and political effects. 'Natural', we must not forget, is as moral a category as 'human', and a most powerful one nowadays.

**Fabio De Sio,**  
Queen Mary, University of London