

9 Norbert Elias

Problems of Involvement and Detachment

Excerpts from Norbert Elias, 'Problems of involvement and detachment',
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One cannot say of a man's outlook in any absolute sense that it is detached or involved (or, if one prefers, 'rational' or 'irrational', 'objective' or 'subjective'). Only small babies, and among adults perhaps only insane people, become involved in whatever they experience with complete abandon to their feelings here and now; and again only the insane can remain totally unmoved by what goes on around them. Normally adult behaviour lies on a scale somewhere between these two extremes. In some groups, and in some individuals of these groups, it may come nearer to one of them than in others; it may shift hither and thither as social and mental pressures rise and fall. But social life as we know it would come to an end if standards of adult behaviour went too far in either direction. As far as one can see, the very existence of ordered group life depends on the interplay in men's thoughts and actions of impulses in both directions, those that involve and those that detach keeping each other in check. They may clash and struggle for dominance or compromise and form alloys of many different shades and kinds - however varied, it is the relation between the two which sets people's course...

As tools of thinking, therefore, 'involvement' and 'detachment' would remain highly ineffectual if they were understood to adumbrate a sharp division between two independent sets of phenomena. They do not refer to two separate classes of objects; used as universals they are, at best, marginal concepts. In the main, what we observe are people and people's manifestations, such as patterns of speech or of thought, and of other activities, some of which bear the stamp of higher, others of lesser detachment or involvement...

Like other people, scientists engaged in the study of nature are, to some extent, prompted in the pursuit of their task by personal wishes and wants; they are often enough influenced by specific needs of the community to which they belong. They may wish to foster their own career. They may hope that the results of their inquiries will be in line with theories they have enunciated before or with the requirements

and ideals of groups with which they identify themselves. But these involvements, in the natural sciences, determine as a rule nothing more than the general direction of inquiries; they are, in most cases, counter-balanced and checked by institutionalized procedures which compel scientists, more or less, to detach themselves, for the time being, from the urgent issues at hand. The immediate problems, personal or communal, induce problems of a different kind, scientific problems which are no longer directly related to specific persons or groups. The former, more narrowly time-bound, often serve merely as a motive force; the latter, the scientific problems which they may have induced, owe their form and their meaning to the wider and less time-bound continuum of theories and observations evolved in this or that problem-area by generations of specialists.

Like other human activities scientific inquiries into nature embody sets of values. To say that natural sciences are 'non-evaluating' or 'value-free' is a misuse of terms. But the sets of values, the types of evaluations which play a part in scientific inquiries of this type, differ from those which have as their frame of reference the interests, the well-being or suffering of oneself or of social units to which one belongs. The aim of these inquiries is to find the inherent order of events as it is, independently not of any, but of any particular observer, and the importance, the relevance, the value of what one observes is assessed in accordance with the place and function it appears to have within this order itself.

In the exploration of nature, in short, scientists have learned that any direct encroachment upon their work by short-term interests or needs of specific persons or groups is liable to jeopardize the usefulness which their work may have in the end for themselves or for their own group. The problems which they formulate and, by means of their theories, try to solve, have in relation to personal or social problems of the day a high degree of autonomy; so have the sets of values which they use: their work is not 'value-free', but it is, in contrast to that of many social scientists, protected by firmly established professional standards and other institutional safeguards against the intrusion of heterogeneous evaluations. . . . Natural scientists seek to find ways of satisfying human needs by means of a detour – the detour via detachment. They set out to find solutions for problems potentially relevant for all human beings and all human groups. The question characteristic of men's involvement: 'What does it mean for me or for us?' has become subordinate to questions like 'What is it?' or 'How are these events connected with others?' In this form, the level of detachment represented by the scientist's work has become more or less institutionalized as part of a sci-

entific tradition reproduced by means of a highly specialized training, maintained by various forms of social control and socially induced emotional restraints; it has become embodied in the conceptual tools, the basic assumptions, the methods of speaking and thinking which scientists use. . . .

There are differences between the standards of certainty and achievement of the natural and the social sciences. It is often implied, if it is not stated explicitly, that the 'objects' of the former, by their very nature, lend themselves better than those of the latter to an exploration by means of scientific methods ensuring a high degree of certainty. However, there is no reason to assume that social data, that the relations of persons are less accessible to man's comprehension than the relations of non-human phenomena, or that man's intellectual powers as such are incommensurate to the task of evolving the theories and methods for the study of social data to a level of fitness, comparable to that reached in the study of physical data. What is significantly different in these two fields is the situation of the investigators and, as part of it, their attitudes with regard to their 'objects'; it is, to put it in a nutshell, the *relationship between 'subjects' and 'objects'*. If this relationship, if situation and attitudes are taken into account, the problems and the difficulties of an equal advance in the social sciences stand out more clearly.

The general aim of scientific pursuits is the same in both fields: stripped of a good many philosophical encrustations it is to find out in what way perceived data are connected with each other. But social as distinct from natural sciences are concerned with conjunctions of persons. Here, in one form or the other, men face themselves: the 'objects' are also 'subjects'. The task of social scientists is to explore, and to make men understand, the patterns they form together, the nature and the changing configuration of all that binds them to each other. The investigators themselves form part of these patterns. They cannot help experiencing them, directly or by identification, as immediate participants from within. . . .

For the time being, social scientists are liable to be caught in a dilemma. They work and live in a world in which almost everywhere groups, small and great, including their own groups, are engaged in a struggle for position and often enough for survival, some trying to rise and to better themselves in the teeth of strong opposition, some who have risen before trying to hold what they have and some going down.

Under these conditions the members of such groups can hardly help being deeply affected in their thinking about social events by the con-

stant threats arising from these tensions to their way of life or to their standards of life and perhaps to their lives. As members of such groups, scientific specialists engaged in the study of society share these vicissitudes with others. Their experience of themselves as upholders of a particular social and political creed which is threatened, as representatives of a specific way of life in need of defence, like the experience of their fellows, can hardly fail to have a strong emotional undertone. Group images – those, for instance, of classes or of nations, self-justifications – the cases which groups make out for themselves, represented, as a rule, an amalgam of realistic observations and collective fantasies (which like the myths of simpler people are real enough as motive forces of action). To sift out the former from the latter, to hold up before these groups a mirror in which they can see themselves as they might be seen, not by an involved critic from another contemporary group but by an inquirer trying to see in perspective the structure and functioning of their relationship with each other, is not only difficult in itself for anyone whose group is involved in such a struggle; expressed in public, it may also weaken the cohesion and solidarity feeling of his group and, with it, its capacity to survive. There is, in fact, in all these groups a point beyond which none of its members can go in his detachment without appearing and, so far as his group is concerned, without becoming a dangerous heretic, however consistent his ideas or his theories may be in themselves and with observed facts, however much they may approximate to what we call the 'truth'.

And yet, if social scientists although using more specialized procedures and a more technical language are in the last resort not much less affected in their approach to the problems of society by preconceived ideas and ideals, by passions and partisan views, than the man in the street, are they really justified in calling themselves 'scientists'?

As things stand, their social task as scientists and the requirements of their position as members of other groups often disagree; and the latter are apt to prevail as long as the pressure of group tensions and passions remains as high as it is.

The problem confronting them is not simply to discard the latter role in favour of the former. They cannot cease to take part in, and to be affected by, the social and political affairs of their groups and their time. Their own participation and involvement, moreover, is itself one of the conditions for comprehending the problems they try to solve as scientists. For while one need not know, in order to understand the structure of molecules, what it feels like to be one of its atoms, in order to understand the functioning of human groups one needs to know, as it were, from inside how human beings experience their own and other

groups, and one cannot know without active participation and involvement.

The problem confronting those who study one or the other aspects of human groups is how to keep their two roles as participant and as inquirer clearly and consistently apart and, as a professional group, to establish in their work the undisputed dominance of the latter.

This is so difficult a task that many representatives of social sciences, at present, appear to regard the determination of their inquiries by preconceived and religiously held social and political ideals as inevitable...

One of the major reasons for the difficulties with which men have to contend in their endeavour to gain more reliable knowledge about themselves is the uncritical and often dogmatic application of categories and concepts highly adequate in relation to problems on the level of matter and energy to other levels of experience, and among them to that of social phenomena. Not only specific expectations as to how perceived data are connected with each other; specific concepts of causation or of explanation formed in this manner are generalized and used almost as a matter of course in inquiries about relations of men...

By and large, theories of science still use as their principal model the physical sciences – often not in their contemporary, but in their classical form. Aspects of their procedures are widely regarded as the most potent and decisive factor responsible for their achievements and as the essential characteristic of sciences generally. By abstracting such aspects from the actual procedures and techniques of the physical sciences, one arrives at a general model of scientific procedure which is known as 'the scientific method'...

The assumption is that in this generalized form 'the scientific method' can be transferred from the field where it originated from the physical sciences, to all other fields, to biological as well as to social sciences, regardless of the different nature of their problems; and that wherever it is applied it will work its magic. Among social scientists in particular it is not uncommon to attribute difficulties and inadequacies of their work to the fact that they do not go far enough in copying the method of physical sciences...

The abstraction from specific procedures of a general model of the scientific method, and the claim often made for it as the supreme characteristic of research that is scientific, have led to the neglect, or even to the exclusion from the field of systematic research, of wide problem-areas which do not lend themselves easily to an exploration by means of a method for which the physical sciences have provided the prototype...

On closer investigation, one will probably find that the tendency to

consider a highly formalized picture of this one set of sciences and their method as the norm and ideal of scientific inquiries generally is connected with a specific idea about the aim of sciences. It is, one might think, bound up with the assumption that among propositions of empirical sciences, as among those of pure mathematics and related forms of logic, the only relevant distinction to be made is that between propositions which are true and others which are false; and that the aim of scientific research and of its procedures is simply and solely that of finding the 'truth', of sifting true from false statements. However, the goal towards which positive sciences are striving is not, and by their very nature cannot be, wholly identical with that of fields like logic and mathematics which are concerned with the inherent order of certain tools of thinking alone. It certainly happens in empirical investigations that people make statements which are simply found to be false. But often enough rough dichotomies like 'true' and 'false' are highly inadequate in their case. People engaged in empirical research often put forward propositions or theories whose merit is that they are truer than others or, to use a less hallowed term, that they are *more* adequate, *more* consistent both with observations and in themselves. In general terms, one might say it is characteristic of these scientific as distinct from non-scientific forms of solving problems that, in the acquisition of knowledge, questions emerge and are solved as a result of an uninterrupted two-way traffic between two layers of knowledge: that of general ideas, theories or models and that of observations and perceptions of specific events.