**Introducing the subject into Big History: a mask of theory over the face of nature**

Big History merges human history, evolutionary biology, cosmology and other historical sciences into one universal history. Big History is a “modern origin story” that aspires to an overarching explication of the world – to a “unified understanding of reality” – while failing to give a thorough account of the nature of subjectivity; we are only told that subjectivity is “summoned by” or “bubbles up from” the brain (Christian 2018). I propose instead that subjectivity overlays the whole of history and science. History and science are always practiced by subjects who (1) cannot strip those parts of their discipline’s factual content that are contributed by the mind from those that are contributed by the world, and (2) necessarily express that content in terms of narratives or theories that are subject imbued. I suggest that this notion of subject and world entwined is suitably articulated by William Whewell and then by pragmatists tacitly influenced by his work.

Like Kant before him, Whewell develops a philosophy of science that aims for a middle ground between realism (*a priori* rationalism) and anti-realism (*a posteriori* empiricism). There is no clear-cut separation between subject and object, between theory and fact, between mind and world. Scientific inquiry oscillates between passive reflection and active participation through time. Both theory and experiment play an inseparable role in generating scientific knowledge and therefore truths. Every inquiring act knits subject and world together; “there is a mask of theory over the whole face of nature” (Whewell 1847, I: 24).

For experience pragmatists like Cheryl Misak, the mind does not represent, mirror or copy reality, but neither is reality simply a product of language games. Instead, like Kant, “[w]e impose human categories on experience” and, like Whewell: “[s]ubject and object merge in experience” (Misak 2014: 29). We cannot pry apart our interpretation from the interpreted. We are “interpretative engines” coordinating and merging theory with data in generating knowledge and truth.

In scientific terms, the scientist synthesises theory and data by following the empirical method. Truths are revealed when theory and experiment synchronise harmoniously, i.e. when predictively successful. We can think of the co-evolution of subjective theory with objective experiment as constituting the ongoing, albeit fallibilistic, progression of science. Subject and object coevolve as a function of our best science in action. The same goes for history and therefore Big History: narrative and fact co-evolve in generating historical truths. We cannot separate the narrative subject from the objective facts as Big History purports to do. Instead, the two intimately entwined in producing truths about the past.

**References**

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