

Hans Albert and Critical Realism

Robert Ferrell

Some admirable attempts have been made in recent years to deal with the subject of World Comparative Philosophy. I have in mind here works such as the anthologies compiled by scholars such as Eliot Deutsch or Robert Solomon. Unfortunately, these have concentrated, by and large, on traditional Western issues, such as truth, identity, ethics, reality, and religion, with contrary and alternative views, mostly from ancient China, added like spices. Even more unfortunately, this approach has not sparked much interest, enthusiasm, or new courses added to the curriculum. Cutback, retrenchment, and simplification seem more on the horizon today.

One of the most promising areas of World Comparative Philosophy only began to be considered in recent editions, and then in a rather truncated way. That is, when considering science from a world comparative perspective, only one, though very interesting, aspect is considered: the problem of progress. Among the many areas of consideration, I would like to see traditional, ethnic methodologies of medical treatment compared, contrasted, tested and evaluated.

Of the many other debates concerning science, one completely ignored, particularly in the United States, concerns the case of Hans Albert and his philosophic approach which he has labeled critical realism. While progress in science is an issue which he has considered, of more importance is his attempt, for several decades, to get his contrarian views considered along with the popular modes of thought.

The thought of Hans Albert has been virtually ignored since a series of vituperative exchanges in Germany in the late 1960's. It seems that the point of view of Jurgen Habermas and Theodore Adorno so thoroughly prevailed over that of Albert and his mentor Karl Popper that the later two must disappear into obscurity like failures and wrong-headed charlatans.

An examination of the issues may prove this to have been unnecessary and, perhaps, unfortunate, especially in light of the idea of Albert's that I find most attractive. That is, in order to attempt the most consistently and effectively progressive science, we must continually pursue alternative theses rather than to remain content with prevailing paradigms in the manner in which Thomas Kuhn has described "normal science."

In fact, the debate in Germany in the 1960's was particularly concerned with social sciences which his opponents found to be significantly different from natural science and unavailable to the approach indicated by Popper and Abel. In Popper's terminology, incorporated by Abel, these disciplines have been

immunized against criticism by the methodology of the prevailing thinkers. The critical views of Habermas and Adorno which prevailed, though lengthy and difficult to follow, seem to be little more than informal fallacy in so far as Popper and Albert are dismissed as “positivists” without considering any further the arguments on their merits.

Presumably, the Frankfurt school critical theorists were able to associate Albert and Popper with both the excesses of Comtian positivism and with the school of logical positivism, which Popper had been among the first to criticize. It is easy to show that Albert’s point of view has been lost through a rhetorical ploy of labeling. As we shall see, the Comtian idea of a scientific elite who were to announce fixed and stable laws to society betrayed Comte’s own insight to regard science as proceeding by free inquiry and constant redefinition of its “laws.” And is nothing like the views of Hans Albert.

The debate can be reduced, ultimately, to the familiar terrain of Kant vs. Hegel. Popper is well known to have formulated his views as a critique of Kant in which he intended to retain what he felt he could use, scientific methodology, while avoiding the transcendental. The result is a view of science as never complete or secure in foundation, but constantly being revised in an approximation of truth never finalized. This view, which Albert adheres to, may be characterized as “positivism” at the risk of complete distortion. Yet Habermas and the others were able to prevail through such rhetorical misinformation.

The approach of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, on the other hand, has much of their conceptuality derived from a Hegelian base; i.e., a reliance upon dialectic thinking and advocating a mode of conceptuality described as “understanding” rather than that of “explanation” favored by Albert. Albert’s replies have been largely ignored and relegated to marginality as Germany and much of the world embraced the Frankfurt methodology which goes largely unexplained and, indeed is mystifying in spite of the much-touted mission to demystify ideology.

Moreover, the papers of Habermas and Adorno went on to critique Popper and Albert only to the extent that they accused them of being positivists. As Albert pointed out then and in his recent work, the Popperian approach is only positivist to the extent that it attempts to reconstruct Kantianism with a scientific method that would extend to all areas of social life in spite of the failure of foundationalism.

Further, Albert charges that, in so far as his opponents do understand anything, it must, most certainly, be in accordance with some sort of law-like behavior if it is to be understood at all. Instead, the Frankfurt people continue to mystify their majority of followers by relying on disciplines (social sciences)

Popper, who was one of the first to actually criticize the logical positivists, is ironically termed a positivist himself because of his attempt to reconstruct science as methodology. Of course, in this sense, he is not far even from Pierce. Yet, modern philosophers caught between dogmatism and skepticism, turned to hermeneutics and, in the words of Albert, the fairy tales of Heidegger on the one hand, and on the other embraced neo-pragmatism even showing signs of slipping back into analytics.

Much of this has been a result of, or a backlash from, the intervention of such thinkers as Kuhn and Feyerabend whose terming alternative theories as incommensurable led either to their own rejection as relativist radicals or to skepticism. Feyerabend, whose famous phrase “Anything Goes” was meant to portray the hopeless predicament of the rationalist rather than his own, is still largely perceived as the worst enemy of science.

Hans Albert, however, continuing in the spirit of Popper, attempts to reconstruct scientific methodology beyond the psychological problem with the failure of foundationalism. He attempts to formulate an heuristic methodological approach that would approximate nomological epistemology and would be useful in all areas of social life as well as in the natural sciences. This approach is rejected and critiqued by Habermas and others as not being possible because the historic nature of social science prevents testing. Albert counters this charge by characterizing his opponents’ views as being unexplained and, in fact, unexplainable except as a rhetorical attempt to immunize themselves against criticism.

Albert has explained his own approach in earlier writing translated by Mary Varney Rorty, in a recent compilation, and in many writings that remain untranslated. There are three basic characteristics. A consistent fallibilism, a methodological rationalism and a critical realism. The fallibilism is familiar to those acquainted with Popper’s alternative to the lack of success of classical method relying upon inductive reason and testability. This approach is often thought of as having been refuted by Kuhn’s having pointed out that most natural science has not behaved this way recently. Popper was concerned with major breakthroughs in science, while Albert is concerned with the way a more progressive science could behave more effectively, not the way normal science was behaved recently.

Albert further believes that the attempt to provide a secure foundation for knowledge is no longer a tenable enterprise. The only rational alternative is to submit proposed solutions to critical examination. That is to say, to consider proposed solutions as attempts to approximate an ultimately unobtainable certain knowledge. They are then to be evaluated with a view to possible improvements, compared with alternative solutions, and a continual search maintained for new and better solutions.

Finally, his characterization of his approach as to be understood as critical

realism takes a stance at odds with many in contemporary philosophy of science. His approach takes the aim of knowledge to be the comprehension and representation of reality, or aspects of it, in opposition to conceptions which take the aim of science to be the construction of systems of signs – conceptual apparatus, systems of propositions, calculi—which have no representative function, but are useful in a certain manner for practical life. In the view of Albert, the sophisticated views of proponents of anti-realism have reduced science to a sort of game with certain rules which relies on experimental testing of propositions, so that the precise specification of the rules is a matter of some importance, but the original point of the activity – the endeavoring to discover the structure of, or of certain parts of, reality – seems like a naive, old fashioned idea.

So, essentially, Albert accepts the general failure of classical rationalism to provide a secure foundation for knowledge, but refuses to leap to the anti-realist stance available to so many in the post Kuhnian era. For him, the failure to provide a guarantee of certainty for truth does not involve the necessity of sacrificing the idea of truth.

Albert's approach has all the advantages of those of his opponents; i.e., problem solving in spite of the insecurity, relativism, or even dogmatism and skepticism resulting from the widespread recognition of the failure of foundationalism. Moreover, Albert's approach is more efficient, more progressive if you will, than that of Kuhn's normal science which employs the method of exhaustion, as Albert calls it after Hugo Dingler. That is, during periods of normal science, a prevailing paradigm is played out until exhausted before revolutionary breakthrough installs another incommensurate paradigm or a regenerative research program as for Larry Laudan.

Albert also critiques Habermas and the Frankfurt school's theory of truth. Over and above the mystery of Hegelian understanding, the consensus theory of truth relies upon a hypothetical ideal community whose consensus is then taken for the criterion of truth. In an age in which the manufacture of consent has been so effectively demonstrated by Chomsky, this approach is revealed to be rather fragile and status quo oriented. This seemingly pragmatic approach ignores the problem of adequate representation and is ineffective in dealing with the epistemological trilemma.