

FERDINAND TÖNNIES

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*Community and  
Civil Society*

EDITED BY  
JOSE HARRIS  
*University of Oxford*

TRANSLATED BY  
JOSE HARRIS AND  
MARGARET HOLLIS



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## Tönnies's preface to the first edition, 1887

The conflict between the historical and the rationalistic point of view has in the course of the nineteenth century penetrated into every area of social or cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> It coincides from the outset with the attack of empiricism and critical philosophy on the established system of rationalism as it was exemplified in Germany by the Wolffian school of thought.<sup>2</sup> Coming to terms with these two methods is thus of major significance for my attempt at a *new analysis of the fundamental problems of social life*.

It is a paradox to say that empiricism, even though it may have carried the day, is also the formal consummation of rationalism. Yet this is nowhere more obvious than in the epistemology of Kant which, while claiming to synthesise the opposing positions, in fact contains equal amounts of modified empiricism and modified rationalism. This admixture had already been evident in the pure empiricism of Hume; for even he does not investigate whether there can in fact be any such thing as universal and necessary knowledge with regard to facts and causality. Instead he deduces the impossibility of such knowledge conceptually, in the same way as Kant later imagined that he could deduce its reality and thus its possibility. Both are proceeding in a rationalistic manner to achieve opposite results. Hume took for granted empiricism with regard to perception,

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith (London: Macmillan, 1993 edn), pp. 606–7, 655–6.

<sup>2</sup> Christian Wolff, the early eighteenth-century philosopher who became a privy councillor at the court of Prussia. A key figure in the German enlightenment, he disseminated the ideas of Descartes and Leibniz by translating them into the idiom of scholasticism. Largely ignored in late nineteenth-century Germany, he was admired by Tönnies for having defended ontology against empiricism and making possible the emergence of Kant (Ferdinand Tönnies, 'Philosophical Terminology. II', *Mind*, n.s., 8 (1899), pp. 470–1).

as though knowledge were the product of objective qualities and circumstances working upon the *tabulam rasam* of the human mind; whereas, according to Kant, knowledge, like thinking itself, is essentially the product of subjectivity, even allowing that things do exist and do have an effect. Correspondence with truth, in Kant's terms, will depend on the nature of the instruments for gathering knowledge. When we get beyond intuitive forms and categories of understanding, these instruments are just complexes of ideas, especially – in cases where it is a question of recognising facts – the association of perceptions and images with names and opinions. When, on the other hand, we seek the *causes* of given effects, we have to presuppose certain conceptions about the nature of agency (beings, things, forces) and their way of working if we are going to sort out what is necessary or certain from what is possible.

According to the empiricism of Hume, however, such certainties can be attained only through an acquired knowledge of regular sequences in time. Thus all connections of a similar kind will be interpreted at first as random but ultimately as necessary, i.e. as causal, because they are confirmed as habits by dint of frequent repetition. In this way causality is removed from things and transferred to the human [observer], which is exactly what Kant does when he terms it a category of understanding [*Verstand*]. Kant, however, rejects the explanation proffered by Hume, that it stems purely from individual experience. Kant's conception, that causality precedes all experience, does indeed point the way to an explanation in greater depth. For the psychological law discovered by Hume has to be reinforced by, and even grounded in, the idea of a mind or intellect coming into existence from a seed and endowed with certain innate powers and tendencies. Physiologically speaking, it is only the human cerebral cortex which distinguishes human thinking from the random activities of animals. The cortex requires precise co-ordination of received impressions to develop its growth, and also a positive relationship between these particular sensations and the entire inner state of sensory experience. That inner state is the absolute *a priori*. It can scarcely be imagined except as something embracing within itself the totality of existence in hazy, general relationships, some of which will gradually become clearer through the development and activity of the brain and sense organs, i.e. of the comprehending intellect. Every experience that follows, like every other activity, occurs by means of the whole being working with the organs which have been previously developed for the purpose. From here there is an infinite regression leading back to the

beginnings of organic life, which in turn should be described in psychological terms as the bodily encapsulation of a certain sensory experience. Everything we do or have done to us (which is simply the other side of doing), and thus life itself, is experience, just as all experience means doing something or having something done to us. All activity involves organic change; it leaves some traces, which either reinforce existing trends in growth and development, or point in a different or contrary direction. These traces are what we think of as *memory*, especially in the shape of the accumulated impact of already formed sense impressions, which in turn can only be produced by memory.

Every possible alteration in an organ is essentially conditioned by its existing overall state, that is, the extent to which it is inclined and likely to accept or resist the change. This is why, in the second book of this work, I shall show how pleasure, habit and memory are simultaneously both the same and different, as basic variants of will and intellectual power with regard to *all* mental activity. My study will also include the problem of the origin and history of human *understanding*. Thus it is simply an interpretation, partly in the spirit of Spinoza and Schopenhauer, and partly also by means of the biological theory of evolution, which both clarifies and is clarified by these philosophical issues: it is an interpretation of the mode of thought with which Kant has indeed defeated Hume. Because Kant's view is correct it demonstrates not only the fact that, but also the reason why, we are able to think of something that exists as 'causing' and something that happens as having been 'caused'. These are functions which exist from earliest times, indeed from eternity, and are rooted in the structure of our understanding. The fact that it cannot be otherwise is a necessity on which our feeling of *certainty* is based, because for something to 'happen' and to 'happen according to its own nature' is one and the same thing, in line with the formal principle of identity.<sup>3</sup>

But if we human beings form a natural 'thought community' (in that causality, like the sense organs, is integral to us, and we then invent names to signify cause and effect), it follows that distinctions with regard to these processes can arise only from thinking – i.e. deciding *which* subjects are the causative factors, and thus do the actual causing (τὰ ὄντως ὄντα). On this matter peoples, groups and individuals part company, although most continue, in their myths and poetry, to share the habit of portraying nature as an active agency in the shape of men and animals. Linguistic

<sup>3</sup> i.e. that more complex versions of the same thing include the less complex ones.

forms show evidence of this, although the distinction between passive objects which have to be moved and active ones which can move by themselves, is something which thought can grasp at an early stage. On the whole what prevails is an intuitive sense of all nature as a living thing, and of all action as the product of free will; gods and demons share in it along with visible actors. But once the world and all its destinies are put into the hands of one single God, who created them from nothing, sustains them according to his good pleasure and gives them laws and ordinances which make their entire development seem regular and necessary, all subordinate wills and freedoms in nature are lost, even the free will of mankind. Those tendencies which cannot be ascribed to the impact of some other 'moving cause' are seen only as inexplicable inclinations and forces. Even the *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*, that image of such enigmatic power and mysterious quality, may be reconstituted, not so much as a fact of experience but as a necessary assumption, in order to exonerate the omnipotent and omniscient God from the responsibility of violating his own rules.<sup>4</sup>

This entire way of thinking, like the concept of a single divine will, belongs to an outlook whose principles are opposed to religious belief and popular ways of thought, even though it bears traces of its origins in these sources. These principles develop until they have a life of their own and seem to be quite independent of their origins, converging with similar principles which have from the beginning operated independently in the areas natural to this way of thinking. This is the realm of *scientific* thought. In its earliest and purest form it has nothing to do with the causes of phenomena, let alone with the desires of men or gods. Starting with the arts of comparing and measuring sizes and quantities, that all-purpose ancillary skill, the art of counting, is developed, i.e. adding and subtracting, multiplication and division into equal parts. What makes it possible for these operations to be done so easily in the head is that an organised system of names for them already exists for this purpose and no variation of detail in the objects perceived interferes with the system-

<sup>4</sup> *Libertum arbitrium indifferentiae*. Tönnies is referring to St Augustine's doctrine that free will, if truly free, must include freedom to sin, and that God's 'foreknowledge' of that sin does not make Him the 'cause' of it (St Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will* (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1964), book two, s.II, and book three, ss. IV-V). As will appear in the argument of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, the idea of the *liberum arbitrium* ('arbitrary' or 'rational' will) which he saw as the psychological core of competitive market Society.

atic combination of equivalent units in whatever way may be required. If mastering such a system requires the support of certain concrete objects, the person doing the calculating will take objects which are if possible identical and which are easily observed and manipulated; and if these are not available he will make them up and ascribe to them these characteristics. Lots of things exist in nature that are in their observable qualities to a greater or lesser degree *similar*, with the perfect degree of similarity being termed *identity*. And although that presumption of identity and calling it by a *name* is natural, as names come to be created in a self-conscious and arbitrary fashion, this process will become artificial and contrived. Natural differences will be disregarded and deliberately either discounted or effectively cancelled out for the explicit purpose of creating something that can be treated as a well-nigh perfect identity.

Moreover, all scientific thinking, such as calculating, *requires* identity for the purposes of measuring, since measurement must demonstrate either equality or a general principle, of which the comparison in question is a particular case, i.e. an exact *ratio* which serves as a yardstick or standard. Thus scientific equations are the standards to which actual relationships between actual objects are referred. They help to save brain-work. Something that would have to be worked out from scratch, over and over again in countless cases, is calculated once and for all in a single prototypical example and then just has to be applied. In relation to the prototypical case all actual cases are either the same as it, or have a determinable relationship to it and consequently to one another. Thus all general or scientific concepts, statements or systems are like tools, by means of which an item of knowledge or at least a reasoned conjecture may be arrived at for particular cases. Using them means substituting the particular names and overall conditions of the given case for those of the hypothetical general case: that is how the 'syllogism' works. This procedure can be seen at work in many different ways in all applied science (i.e. thinking according to first principles). In all pure science we have the reference to a system of names (a terminology) which is represented in the simplest way by the system of numbers (i.e. as thinking about the principle of identity, or measuring one thing by another). For all pure science concerns itself exclusively with those constructs of thought – such as the quantity or size of an object (where it is simply a question of calculation), or the infinitesimal point, the straight line, the plane without thickness, the proportions of bodies – by which relations between spatial phenomena may be determined.



In the same way imaginary happenings in *time* are taken as types or models of real happenings, such as the fall of a body in a vacuum; its speed as a measurable unit of space moving through unspecified time, and whether this speed is constant or varying, will be calculated according to certain prior assumptions.<sup>5</sup> Application becomes ever more difficult depending on how far the purely hypothetical and general case differs from the concrete and particular ones, and on their variety and irregularity. From observing separate bodies which through motion make a momentary connection in space we get the *scientific* concept of *cause* as a quantity of work performed (which is contained in the motion). This is equal to, and thus interchangeable with, another quantity – the effect – in line with the principle of the identity of action and reaction. This is an idea which can only be fully grasped, when all connotation of objective reality and creative power has been removed from the concept of *force*, which it originally embraces.<sup>6</sup> Thus the great system of pure mechanics comes into being, with all the concrete sciences, above all physics and chemistry, as its applications.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile alongside and contained within this scientific view of causality there develops what we might call the *philosophical* view, which emerges as both its ultimate culmination and its critique. It is an organic as opposed to a mechanical view, a psychological view as opposed to a physical one. Moreover, according to this view, nothing except creative force exists; it is the real and permanent unit of a system of universal energy conservation from which all its particular manifestations are necessarily derived. All the other laws of nature serve the life

<sup>5</sup> A reference to the different views of Aristotle and Newton, as to whether such a body would gather speed, or travel always at the same pace.

<sup>6</sup> A reference to the mechanistic view that life itself was explicable only as a conjunction of chemical and physical forces, a view challenged in his own day by ‘vitalist’ theories of biology (‘Philosophical Terminology. Part II’, pp. 481–2).

<sup>7</sup> Tönnies’s argument in this section, and in sections on physics and mechanics throughout *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, closely follows James Clerk Maxwell, *Matter and Motion* (1876) (reprinted London: Routledge and Thoemmes Press, 1996). He appears also to have read Clerk Maxwell’s *Encyclopaedia Britannica* articles on ‘Atoms’ and ‘Attraction’ (reprinted in *The Scientific Papers of James Clerk Maxwell*, 2 vols. ed. W. D. Niven (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890), pp. 445–91). Tönnies’s debt to Clerk Maxwell is recorded in his autobiographical sketch in *Die Philosophie der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1922), p. 218. Another major source on science in relation to philosophy was William Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance* 3 vols., second edition (Marburg, 1873–5), which Tönnies read in 1878 ‘with great joy’ (Ferdinand Tönnies, *Friedrich Paulsen, Briefwechsel 1876–1908*, ed. Olaf Klose, E. G. Jacoby and Irma Fischer (Kiel: Ferdinand Hirt, 1961), p. 17).

principle of the universe, in the same way as the laws derived from mechanics serve the life principle of every living part – of an individual or species – which is realised in them. The more that science becomes on the one hand universal, while on the other extending its methods to the organic world, the more it must become in this sense philosophical. A philosophical view of nature which is simple and necessary in its general outline can, however, descend to multiple and relative-cum-accidental truths, depending on how much it has absorbed the principles of science. It has to demonstrate life and its forms by means of *types* which are at least derived from concrete generalities (or conceptions), since all life consists of development from the general to the particular.<sup>8</sup>

All science, and thus all philosophy that takes the form of science, is *rationalistic*. Its objects are matters of thought – mental constructions. But all philosophy, and thus all science that takes the form of philosophy, is *experiential*; meaning that all ‘being’ must be seen as dynamic, and all existence as subject to movement and change; while ‘not-being’ or nothingness (τὸ μὴ ὄν) must also be seen as part of true reality, hence in a thoroughly dialectical manner.<sup>9</sup> The empirical and the dialectical methods require and complement one another. Both are concerned simply with tendencies which meet, struggle and combine, but ultimately can be understood only as psychological realities – indeed, are familiar to us as such. For we recognise the human will as our own and that the destinies of human lives make up the sum of these wills, even though always strictly limited by the rest of nature. Both methods are confirmed above all in general and individual human psychology. The facts of general psychology are synonymous with historical and contemporary culture, i.e. with human life together and all that it creates.

Mere history – just as a collection of facts – is neither science nor philosophy. But it is both together, in so far as the principles of human life may be found in it. It is a bundle of events which can be interpreted only in a very vague way as regards its beginning and end. We know almost as little about the past as we know about the future. What we experience as the ‘present’ we must first observe and try to understand.

<sup>8</sup> One of the basic principles of the philosophy of Herbert Spencer, invoked by Tönnies at many points (below, pp. 134, 213).

<sup>9</sup> Despite Tönnies's limited admiration for Hegel (above, p. xxii), this passage appears to draw directly on Hegelian thought (see John W. Burridge, ‘Hegel's Conception of Logic’, in F. C. Beiser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 194–6).

But a great many of the serious and estimable studies which have ventured into this area – which like nature itself is both plain to see and yet utterly mysterious – are diminished in value because of the difficulties of approaching it in an unbiased and theoretically rigorous manner. The researcher is too close to the matters under observation. Much effort and practice are required, perhaps even a natural bent for cold reasoning, to study the facts of history with the same detached attitude with which a natural scientist pursues the life processes of a plant or animal. And even a learned and critical public does not as a rule want to be told the view of an author about how things are, how they came about, and how they will turn out; they would much rather hear how he thinks they *should* be. We are used to seeing facts organised according to certain premises, and this may be up to a point inevitable, but people fail to see that deliberate avoidance of this pitfall is what forms the scientific habit of mind. We expect and almost encourage the opinionated and violent rhetoric of an interested party instead of the calm and composed logic of the unbiased observer.

Thus in modern *social science*, and especially in Germany, a struggle is being waged about the implications of underlying theory. We may well accept this as being a reflection of conflicting currents in debates on policy and legislation, through which the representatives of rival interests and classes may claim with greater or lesser sincerity to speak on behalf of opposing convictions and doctrines (what might be called the ‘technological’ principles of politics). These differences may sometimes come from a deeper source in the moral sensibilities and inclinations of those who represent them, but even so, like other passions, these feelings should not be allowed to distort an objective view of things. It seems to me, moreover, that (to take the most outstanding example) the relevance of the antagonism between the doctrines of *individualism* and *socialism* for a theoretical understanding of the real facts of modern industry and commerce, is as about as great as the relevance of the struggle between allopathic and homeopathic medicine to the science of physiology. Instead we should free ourselves from the mists of all such traditions. We must situate ourselves completely outside the things we are examining and observe bodies and movements as if with telescope and microscope. Within the sphere of *civilisation* these matters are as distinct from each other as the orbits of the heavenly bodies are from the parts and life processes of an elementary organism in the world of *nature*. On the one hand they are examined on a gigantic and universal

scale, on the other in minute and specific detail. From the universal point of view, history itself is nothing more than a part of the destiny of one planet – a chapter in the development of organic life, made possible by the gradual cooling of the Earth. Looked at in detail on the other hand, history is concerned with the environment and conditions of my own daily life – everything to do with human activity that takes place before my ears and eyes.

Empirical and dialectical philosophy attempt to focus on all these different perspectives simultaneously. In both philosophies the necessities of life and the passions and activities of human nature are fundamentally the same. The analytical disciplines also refer to them in general terms, but mainly without any specificity of time or place. They assume that all individuals are entirely separate and striving for their own advantage in a rationalistic and arbitrary way. These disciplines have thus taken it upon themselves to determine not only the abstract laws governing the relations and connections between these individuals and their wills, but also the changes in their material conditions that are brought about by commercial contact. The discipline dealing with the *formal* consequences of such relationships is pure jurisprudence (or natural law), which may be compared to geometry. The discipline which copes with their material nature is political economy, which is similar to abstract mechanics. In their applications both disciplines are concerned with the conditions of social reality; but they are much more effective in understanding and dealing with these conditions in cases where, over the course of civilisation, human relationships and business affairs have become more complex and highly developed.

Nevertheless, up till now all “organic” or “historical” opinion has been hostile to both these disciplines. My study attempts both to encompass the jurisprudential and economic approaches and to keep them subordinate. But I have been able to do this only sketchily, like many other things. The complexities of my subject are overwhelming. Relevant structures of thought must be examined to see, not so much whether they are correct, as whether they are fitted to the task. This, however, can only be proved by the exposition which I am about to offer, and I hope that I shall be up to it. I will not be held responsible for erroneous interpretations nor for crackpot practical applications. People who are not used to thinking conceptually should refrain from passing judgement in such matters. But this sort of restraint is no more to be expected than any other kind in the present day and age.

I could easily write a special chapter about the *influences* to which I owe the development of my thought. In the social sciences themselves these are many and varied. Some of the most important names crop up in occasional quotations. I would like to mention, however, that the great sociological works of A. Comte and Herbert Spencer have been my constant companions on the way. Both have their weaknesses, Comte particularly in dealing with the prehistoric foundations, Spencer in general historical outlook; and both present the development of mankind in too one-sided a fashion as directly dependent on man's intellectual progress (though Comte in his later work comes to see things more profoundly). I would further like to mention that I have been a fervent disciple of the tireless efforts of Messrs A. Schaeffle and A. Wagner, and continue to be so. But though both of them agree with the deep political insights of Rodbertus, neither of them, so far as I can see, seems to recognise as he does the pathological aspect of the development of modern Society. Mere goodwill on the part of theorists and legislators can do nothing more than modify such development.

Moreover, I will not conceal the fact that my study has been most profoundly influenced – stimulated, instructed and corroborated – by three distinguished authors, all very different from each other. (1) Sir Henry Maine (the author of *Ancient Law*, *Village Communities in the East and West*, *The Early History of Institutions*, *Early Law and Custom*) is a philosophical legal historian with the broadest horizons. My only regret, in reading his illuminating comments, is that he unjustly opposes the extraordinary insights offered on the prehistory of the family, community life, and all such institutions by authors from Bachofen's *Matriarchy* through to Morgan's *Ancient Society* and beyond. Otherwise I give him credit for his optimistic view of modern conditions. (2) Otto Gierke (the author of *Das deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*, 3 volumes, and also of *Johannes Althusius* and several articles in periodicals). Gierke's learning never fails to fill me with admiration, nor his opinions with respect, even though I never encounter in his writings what I consider to be the most important point of view – the economic one. (3) In this latter respect the most outstanding and profound social philosopher is Karl Marx (in *A Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital*). I am happy to draw attention to his name, since he has never been forgiven, even by clever people, for the allegedly utopian fantasy which [in reality] he took pride in demolishing completely. (The fact that a thinker has taken part in active workers'

movements is no concern of his critics; if they think that was immoral, who pokes his nose into *their* immoral acts?)

The overall conception, which I for my part would like to extract from all this is as follows. The natural, underlying constitution of civilisation (though now lost to us) is communistic, while the contemporary and developing constitution of the future is socialistic. This view in my opinion is not strange to genuine historians when they understand these matters most acutely, even although the 'detective' who unmasked the capitalist method of production was the only one who was able to make it fully clear. I see in all this a hanging-together of historical facts which is as natural as life and death. I may enjoy life and lament the fact of death; joy and sadness disappear when I contemplate the divine plan. I stand entirely apart from everyone else in my terminology and definitions. But one thing is easy to understand – there is no *individualism* in history and civilisation, except of the kind that flows from *Gemeinschaft* and remains conditioned by it, or else of the kind that gives rise to and sustains *Gesellschaft*. These opposing relationships of individual man to mankind in general are the very heart of the matter.

Since I regard this idea as my own I need not fear any criticism of the central theme of this deeply imperfect work. Personal communications from readers, known or unknown to me, will be better appreciated by me if they have been moved or stimulated by a sympathetic attitude. Much can come of this – for me, at least, reward for my labours and fresh stimulus. For it remains true, however hard one struggles for truth, that:

all opinions about things belong to the individual, and we know only too well that our beliefs depend not on reason but on the will, and that people understand only what is appropriate for them and what they can recognise. In knowledge as in action prejudice settles everything, and prejudice, as its name indicates, is a judgement made before an examination of the facts. It is an acceptance or rejection of things which are in sympathy or not in sympathy with our nature; it is a happy impulse of our being towards both truth and falsehood, towards everything with which we feel in harmony (Goethe, *Theory of Colour*, polemical section WW, 38, p. 16).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre, Polemischer Theil* (1810), in Goethe, *Werke*, 53 vols. (Weimar edn: H. Bohlau, 1887–1919), Abth. II, Band 2, p. 18. This was the work in which Goethe controversially attacked Isaac Newton's account of visual perception and argued that colour was determined by the eye of the beholder as well as by the objective properties of matter.

*Community and Civil Society*

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As regards Book Two, I ought to say that, proceeding systematically, it would have been better placed *before* Book One; but I have deliberately chosen this order. The books complement and explain each other. Finally I must add, as I have promised to do, that a first draft of this work – of which, however, hardly a trace remains – was presented in 1881 to the Arts Faculty of Kiel University as my *Habilitation* thesis.

Husum in Schleswig-Holstein

Ferdinand Tönnies