The Future of Philosophy In the Digital Humanities

Heßbrüggen-Walter, Stefan

early.modern.thought.online@gmail.com
Universitäten Tours / Orléans, Frankreich

When thinking about the relation between philosophy and the digital humanities, a number of interdependent problems need to be resolved:

1. Is there a unified method for the digital humanities and, if so, is it applicable to philosophy?

2. If we believe that the digital humanities are committed to 'the scientific method', must philosophy be regarded as a science in order to be part of the digital humanities?

3. Conversely, if DH is not committed to 'the scientific method', does that mean that philosophy must be practised as a 'humanist discipline' in order to be part of the digital humanities?

This contribution will not present conclusive answers to these questions. It will rather use them as background for the introduction for an alternative understanding of the relation between philosophy and the digital humanities that is inspired by the founder of the Vienna Circle, Moritz Schlick, a conception that, as I believe, can provide useful orientation for the future of philosophy in the digital humanities. The first section of this contribution contains some preliminary reflections on the three questions regarding method that I introduced above. This will lead to a brief discussion of Schlick's understanding of the relation between philosophy and other disciplines, in particular the sciences. I will close with some indications how to apply lessons to be learned in Schlick to understanding the relation between philosophy and the digital humanities.

'Methods' And 'the Scientific Method'

When we talk about 'method' in the digital humanities, we can mean two different things:

1. a specific 'research method', e. g. topic modeling or network analysis, dedicated to a specific group of problems (probability distributions of co-occurring terms or the relative importance of nodes in a network). Methods in this sense exist in the sciences, too (e. g. radio astronomy, spectroscopy).

2. If we use 'method' in the singular, we do not refer to individual methods, but an overarching understanding of how to proceed in a given discipline or field of study – or, even more ambitiously, in 'science' as such, i. e. 'the scientific method' in the singular. Here, we will concern ourselves only with the latter. The question is then: are the digital humanities a field that is defined by adhering to 'the scientific method' in much the same way as the natural and (quantitative) social sciences? Some think so (Roller 2021, Barzen / Leymann 2017), others are more sceptical (Durlacher 2022).

However, I will not address this problem directly, not least because it is not that simple to understand how to apply the notion of 'the scientific method' to what we do in the digital humanities. Instead, I want to ask what adoption of the thesis 'DH practices the scientific method' would mean for the prospects of 'digital philosophy', i. e. philosophy as part of the digital humanities. If research questions in philosophy can be answered through the application of DH methods (in the plural), and DH methods are instantiations of 'the scientific method', this would mean that philosophy – or the parts of philosophy that are amenable to such approaches – must be considered as a science.

Conversely, if we believe that DH methods are not exemplifications of 'the scientific method', we may feel tempted to regard philosophy as being fundamentally different from the sciences. This raises the question whether it may then count as one of the humanities (to be conceived in a way that makes them fundamentally different from the sciences) or whether we should understand philosophy as something that is neither a scientific nor a humanist discipline. One way to conceive philosophy as one of the humanities emphasises the role of the history of philosophy for philosophy as a whole, e. g. as history of philosophical thinking in all periods of history, all countries of the world, and for infinitely many 'thinking humans' and their ways of life, in other words a global history of philosophy in the true meaning of the term: a research program that is inspired both by Dilthey's conception of Geistesgeschichte and the potential of digital methods to process large quantities of multilingual texts (Hartung 2023, 102).

Schlick And Philosophy As Science

Some orientation in this complex and disputed area can be gleaned from an article first published by Moritz Schlick, the founder of the Vienna Circle, in 1932 and republished in a collection of his papers (Schlick 1938). As I have argued elsewhere (Heßbrüggen-Walter 2020), the rubrication of thinkers of the Vienna Circle as 'neopositivists' should not stand in the way of a deeper appreciation of their contributions, since it seems that many of the problems they grappled with resurface when thinking about the place of digital humanities in the contemporary landscape.

Schlick resolves the question whether or not to count philosophy as part of the humanities by making a distinction between the perspective of the historian and the perspective of the philosopher proper. While the historian assesses extrinsic values like the beauty or historical relevance of a philosophical text or author, the philosopher is primarily interested in whether or not it contains truths (Schlick 1938, 118). The perspective of the historian is, according to Schlick, not per se illegitimate. It only becomes misleading when we are tempted to draw philosophical conclusi-

ons from it, i. e. when we derive from the many fruitless attempts to put forward philosophical truths the sceptical conclusion that progress in philosophy is impossible (Schlick 1938, 120). If we assume that history of philosophy is part of the humanities in this understanding, digital approaches in this domain are on a part with the role of digital methods in the humanities at large. But we must accept the limitation that their results will not contribute to a better understanding of what Schlick takes to be philosophy strictu sensu.

The relationship between philosophy and the sciences is more complex. Schlick reminds the reader that the opposition between both is a product of the late 18th and 19th century when the disciplines now comprising the sciences emancipated themselves from philosophy and, conversely, philosophers began to propagate philosophy as a science in its own right: the philosopher "sits in his library, he consults innumerable books, he works at his desk and studies various opinions of many philosophers as a historian would compare his different sources, or as a scientist would do while engaged in some particular pursuit in any special domain of knowledge; he has all the bearing and really believes that he is using in some way the scientific method, only doing so on a more general scale." (Schlick 124) Schlick provides mainly two reasons why this self-image of the philosopher as a scientist sui generis is misguided:

1. Philosophy in this sense has no definite domain: it concerns itself with 'most general truths', but what these truths are about is again undecided.

2. Philosophy differs from the sciences in that it is incapable of aggregating knowledge in a cooperative manner: "Scientific results go on developing, combining themselves with other achievements, and receiving general acknowledgment, but there is no such thing to be discovered in the work of the philosopher." (Schlick 1938, 124)

Where does this leave digital philosophy? If we understand its role – in analogy to this understanding of philosophy as science sui generis – as contributing to insights into philosophical problems, i. e. if we believe we could use the computer to assess the truth or falsity of philosophical propositions, such attempts might fail. This failure, however, would not be due to some deficiency in our technical solutions (methods in the first of the senses distinguished above), but due to a misunderstanding of what philosophy is about. I would not go so far as to claim that such a non-empirical a priori argument based on a certain understanding of philosophy is in itself conclusive. Rather, I think that Schlick's constructive proposal for how to understand and practice philosophy provides helpful directions for the future of digital philosophy.

Digital Philosophy As an Activity

Schlick does not think that philosophy should be abandoned. We just have misunderstood its proper place in the overall order of knowledge. Instead of trying to turn it into a science, he envisions a division of labour between philoso-

phy and science, taking into account that both endeavours are fundamentally different. Schlick understands philosophy as a peculiar form of activity, namely the activity of 'finding meaning' or 'clarification', while science consists in the pursuit of truth. Nevertheless, philosophy and science are rather intimately related, so that at times the scientist must turn into a philosopher:

> […] sometimes in the course of their work they [sc. scientists] are surprised to find, by the contradictory results at which they arrive, that they have been using words without a perfectly clear meaning, and then they will have to turn to the philosophical activity of clarification, and they cannot go on with the pursuit of truth before the pursuit of meaning has been successful. (Schlick 1938, 130)

Digital humanists engage in clarification as soon, as they aim to translate foundational concepts of their background discipline (e. g. history or literary studies) into a form that is amenable to digital processing (see e. g. Bosse 2019 for a comprehensive analysis of what is involved in the historical concept of 'place'). But, next to that, they need to determine the meaning of concepts related to their own research practice (AG Digital Humanities Theorie 2023, Ciula et al. 2018). These practices qualify as philosophical in Schlick's sense regardless of whether practitioners are taken to be philosophers in the academic sense of the term. In fact, one can suspect that the practice of clarifying the terminology of background disciplines is closely related to how Schlick describes the situation of ethics and aesthetics, philosophical subdisciplines that "[…] do not yet possess sufficiently clear concepts, most of their work is still devoted to clarifying them, and therefore it may justly be called philosophical." (Schlick 1938, 132)

Conclusion: The Future of Digital Philosophy

We have distinguished a 'wide' and a 'strict' conception of philosophy in Schlick. Both can be meaningfully applied to philosophy as a part of the digital humanities and are not mutually exclusive. We can understand philosophy in relation to the digital humanities as a discipline of the digital humanities that engages with philosophical texts from the perspective of the humanities at large, i.e. without an interest in their truth, akin to other historical disciplines. Or we can take it to be an activity that aims to clarify our use of terms through 'operationalisation', i. e. through a transformation that makes them amenable to digital processing using formal (i. e. programming) languages. In this sense, every digital humanist is a philosopher. Besides that, digital humanities uses terminology that expresses specific concerns of the discipline. Such concepts are in need of clarification and 'operationalisation' as well.

But we do not need to stop here. Why should it not be possible to apply a strict understanding of digital philosophy

to the history of philosophy at large, using tools of the digital humanities to clarify philosophical terms in their historical development? An exploration of this approach would be a worthwhile project for the future of digital philosophy (Heßbrüggen-Walter 2023).

Bibliographie

AG Digital Humanities Theorie des Verbandes Digital Humanities im deutschsprachigen Raum e. V. (ed.). 2023. Begriffe der Digital Humanities. Ein diskursives Glossar. In Zeitschrift für digitale Geisteswissenschaften / Working Papers, 2. Wolfenbüttel. 10.17175/wp_2023_001

Ciula, Arianna and Øyvind Eide, Christina Marras, Patrick Sahle (eds.). 2018. *Models and Modelling between Digital and Humanities: A Multidisciplinary Perspective.* URL: https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-62883, last access: 2023-07-19.

Barzen, Johanna and Frank Leymann. 2017. "Patterns as Formulas: Patterns in the Digital Humanities." In *Proceedings of the Ninth International Conferences on Pervasive Patterns and Applications* (PATTERNS), 17-21.

Bosse, Arno. 2019. "Place". In *Reassembling the Republic of Letters in the Digital Age: Standards, Systems, Scholarship,* eds. Howard Hotson, Thomas Wallnig, Göttingen: Göttingen University Press, 89-95.

Durlacher, Thomas. "Philosophical perspectives on computational research methods in digital history." In *Digital History and Hermeneutics*, eds. Andreas Fickers, Juliane Tatarinov, Berlin, Boston. De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 109-127.

Hartung, Gerald. 2023. "Philosophiegeschichtsschreibung und die Idee der Geistesgeschichte – das Dilthey-Projekt." In *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 97: 95-104.

Heßbrüggen-Walter, Stefan. 2020. "Positivismus der geistigen Gegenstände: Carnap und die Digital Humanities." In *Book of Abstracts, DHd 2020 Spielräume: Digital Humanities zwischen Modellierung und Interpretation (DHd 2020).* 10.5281/zenodo.4621804

Heßbrüggen-Walter, Stefan. 2023. A Philosophical View of the Digital History of Concepts: Four Theses And a Postscript. In *Digital Humanities 2023. Collaboration as Opportunity (DH2023)*, Graz, Austria. 10.5281/zenodo.8107790

Roller, Ramona. 2021. "Theory-Driven Statistics for the Digital Humanities: Presenting Pitfalls and a Practical Guide by the Example of the Reformation." In *Journal of Cultural Analytics* 7. 10.22148/001c.57764.

Schlick, Moritz. 1938. "The Future of Philosophy". In *Gesammelte Aufsätze 1926-1936*. Wien: Gerold & Co., 117-133.