



~~(Un)Knowledge~~ – Dynamics of Negation in Premodern Cultures

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For the investigation of processes of knowledge change in the premodern era, the CRC *Episteme in Motion* defines episteme as ‘knowledge of something’, i.e. as knowledge that is vested with a claim to validity. Starting from the observation that episteme can be especially deemed to be in motion, when knowledge remains imprecise, or is rejected, unrecognised or suppressed in the very act of mediation, the 2019 Annual Conference focuses on the relationship between knowledge, transfer and negation in European and non-European cultures of the premodern era. Negation acts as an impulse in knowledge transfer in the sense that processes of suppression, destruction and concealment are inherent in creative capacities. If, in this respect, we focus our attention on the sensemaking dynamics of contributive negation, we may speak of negative transfer. This contrasts with an understanding of the term within the framework of loss, impairment and obstruction. We therefore understand negation, on the one hand, as a genuine component of a set mode of knowledge that is bound up with negating, antithetical or elliptical modes of representation and, on the other, as a category that makes it possible to bring the rejected, the excluded and the irrecoverable into focus in the re-contextualisation of knowledge. Within this framework, epistemic changes at the elementary level of mediation must be examined within the context of their historical placement. Equally, their impact on the history of knowledge and, with it, the structural dimension of negative transfers must be interrogated. At its Seventh Annual Conference, the CRC invites attendees to explore the fundamentals of capacities of negation in the premodern era, and to debate the question of the extent to which negative transfers are necessary, constitutive or productive in the production of new knowledge.

Different forms of negative transfer that are indebted to epistemic re-contextualisation will be analysed, reflected upon and discussed. The point of departure is the assumption that knowledge transfers are, to a certain extent, always accompanied by negations. Each inclusion is equally associated with exclusion, such that assertion and repression manifest as complementary processes in

knowledge generation. Dynamics of selection consequently show both a positive as well as a negative aspect, to which, however, a constructive capacity can also be attributed, if the continuing influence of the excluded brings the knowledge base in question into focus. Thus, for instance, apocalypses are largely excluded from the process of canonisation, while apocalyptic motifs are, at the same time, incorporated into text genres such as commentaries or saints' lives. By correlating institutional mechanisms of exclusion with the possibilities of genre-related inclusion, the negation of apocalyptic texts is thus no longer told as a history of loss, but rather appears as an apparent precondition for the transfer of knowledge. At the centre of the conference sits the rejected, the winnowed out, the forgotten and the degraded knowledge beyond accepted epistemic spheres of validity – knowledge which is latently fitted out with new functions for false directions, redirections and *Sonderwege*, or which continues to function in a different guise.

Focus 1 — Negation as Variation

With every act of knowledge transfer, accepted knowledge is under threat of being heavily altered and thereby partially negated. Therefore texts, artefacts, places or practices connected with knowledge can be partially or completely repurposed, destroyed, overlooked, or misunderstood in their various aspects. Writing errors in manuscripts are typical cases in point of variation of knowledge at the elementary level of knowledge transfer. Additionally, misinterpretations, levelling of differences through translations, material decay, assembly, didactic reductions and so forth change the transferred knowledge object and put epistemic claims of validity to the test. Which types of variation can be differentiated at this level, and which factors prove to be relevant in exchange processes of whatever complexity? The specific question of socio-cultural conditions, political constellations, material and medial conditions assists exploring specific historical situations that foster productive problems of interpretation, media fluctuation, amalgamation, reinterpretation or suppression, even when it is not always possible to determine the exact reasons and triggers for such deviations.

Focus 2 — Negation as a Structurally Effective Factor

The structural level of such negative transfers must be distinguished from this elementary level of mediation, a structural level which, from the perspective of the history of knowledge, involves an effective alteration of accepted knowledge. This is the case, for example, when a typographical error or suggested correction in a manuscript suddenly becomes the standard reading in a given text. But even if a variation, understood as elementary, aims at conscious rebellion, claims of innovation and

explicit rejection, which are thematised historically, do not necessarily have to prevail. So it was that didactical-rhetorical traditions present in universities continued to affect French social movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, despite all claims of rupture. These therefore prove to be forms of staged negation. In contrast, which factors are significant in the demonstrative acceptance or tacit integration of deviations within the current knowledge base? And in what ways can forms of concealment, non-disclosure, suppression or prohibition of such deviations weaken or strengthen valid knowledge and be latently responsible for the genesis of new knowledge? In a nutshell, what knowledge exists despite or even because of negation? Of particular relevance in this context is the question of the role of participatory actors and institutions as well as the processes of licence and censorship.

Focus 3 — Negation as a Condition for Knowledge

A special case of negation comes into effect when it is not an issue of destruction, concealment or reinterpretation within transfer processes, but when an object of knowledge induces negation in the action of its own mediation and is thus bound to a set mode of knowledge. This is, for instance, the case in the negative theology of the Judeo-Christian traditions, which develops apophatic modes of speech in order to create a linguistic form of reflection for the transcendence of God, which, in the very act of discourse, directly questions any discursive quality in its subject matter. Similarly, in the field of premodern aesthetics, a knowledge of the beauty of nature and art occasionally remains elusive; it cannot be grasped in concrete terms despite the attempt to convey its definition. In this context, negation undergoes a decisive positivity. In both cases, it proves to be a constituent element of the reflective examination with an object that eludes a theorising codification. The third focus of the conference is on this fundamental aspect of negation as a condition of knowledge. What relevance is attached to such knowledge in different areas of knowledge in the premodern period, knowledge which, as object, is linked to set strategies of representation of negation? Which structural analogies and differences can be observed from transdisciplinary and transcultural perspectives? Which conditions must be fulfilled in order for such knowledge to gain validity and what consequences arise in its transferability and teachability?

In this sense, different facets and modes of negation – its spectrum of effects, its functions, its conditions and its consequences – will be explored at the conference and will be based on case studies of historically diverse provenance. On this basis, the general significance of these phenomena for the transmission and the transformation of knowledge, as well as their relation, will be discussed and

determined, to the extent that the category of negation – in contrast to concepts of rupture and revolution – permits a nuanced description of the premodern history of knowledge.