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Searching for the concrete subject: On the epistemic role of lived-experience in Paul Natorp's critical epistemology

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Introduction

The Research Problem, Hypothesis, Contribution, Aims

The following dissertation deals with Paul Natorp's *General Psychology according to the Critical Method*. Whilst Natorp never completed the entire project of formulating a philosophical psychology, I show that the final outline of this project does contain a novel and systematic enlargement of the neo-Kantian transcendental foundation of objective knowledge. In this respect, I argue that Natorp makes a significant critical-epistemological (*erkenntniskritisch*) contribution to the main problem of the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism, namely, the question of the a priori conditions of validity (*Geltungsbedingungen*) of objective knowledge. What is this particular contribution of the general psychology? In which sense does the general psychology enlarge the research programme of the Marburg School? Throughout this dissertation, I will hold that Natorp's critical-psychological project attempted to systematically explain the immanent and necessary relation between validity and *lived experience* (*Erlebnis*). By doing so, Natorp advanced towards a preliminary epistemology of the epistemic agency of concrete subjects, that is, an epistemology that explains and describes the epistemic role of lived experience in the production of objective determinations. Thus, by emphasizing the epistemic character of lived experience, my dissertation aims at demonstrating that Natorp's general psychology offers a novel transcendental description of the a priori conditions of the process through which individuals may become rational agents, that is, promoters of a rationally-engaged epistemic life.

The common approach to the general psychology has focused upon what I call the negative contribution, namely, Natorp's critique of the dispute over psychologism. Regarding this, however, I defend the idea that Natorp's philosophical psychology also develops a positive contribution. The project of a general psychology consists in the systematic construction of a non-empirical or idealist philosophical psychology

(*philosophische Psychologie*).¹ As such, I claim that Natorp's philosophical psychology from 1912 can be understood as the last systematic effort to define the epistemic role of perceptual lived experience in the production of objectively valid knowledge. Concretely, my hypothesis holds that perceptual lived experience can be understood as the a priori subjective condition for the recognition (*Anerkennung*) and appropriation (*Aneignung*) of the objective validity of contents of thought by any concrete subject. Thus the principal goal of this dissertation is to analyse the epistemological meaning and contribution of this statement.

It is well-known that the problem of lived experience is not new in the context of transcendental philosophy. Thanks to the early works of Wilhelm Dilthey and then to Hans Georg-Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (Dilthey 1922; Gadamer 2010), we know that this concept was first interpreted around 1790, following publication of Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Despite the fact that many philosophers and poets – among them Goethe, Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, and Novalis – made use of the concept to refer to the transcendental meaning of creativity and the facticity of knowledge, regarding art and science, none developed a systematic interpretation of its epistemic role in the production of objectivity. As (Cramer 1972) explains, the concept of lived experience was used in particular to refer, in a wide and diverse sense, to the subjective dimension of knowledge. Thus, from the viewpoint of this philosophical and academic context, I think that Paul Natorp's philosophical psychology is one of the first systematic analyses to revive and deal with the epistemic role of lived experience in the production of objective knowledge. In the final version of his treatise, Natorp explains the epistemological relation of lived experience to objectivity through the concepts of consciousness (*Bewusstsein*), content (*Inhalt*), and perception (*Wahrnehmung*). Systematic analysis of these concepts is undertaken in chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this dissertation. However, let me illustrate here

¹ In the coming chapters I will refer to Natorp's neo-Kantian psychology as 'general psychology' or 'philosophical psychology'. Natorp defines it as 'general' because it analyses the a priori logical fundamentals of the object of any psychology, namely, the *psyche* or subjectivity as such. Insofar as it deals with the a priori fundamentals of the problem of the psyche, Natorp also calls it 'philosophical' psychology, for the task of transcendental philosophy is precisely to analyse the a priori principles of objective knowledge (Natorp 1912a, 1–2). In his 1913 essay *Philosophy and Psychology*, Natorp suggests another definition, namely, 'psychology of the philosophical', adding that this psychology is not a 'philosophical psychology' (Natorp 1913, 200). This sentence seems to introduce a clear contradiction with the 1912 definition. Nevertheless, Natorp maintains the definition of general psychology as the analysis of the a priori principles of objective knowledge from the viewpoint of subjectivity. Since the expression 'psychology of the philosophical' may sound a little odd to contemporary readers, I choose to speak of 'general psychology' or, which is the same, 'philosophical psychology'.

Natorp's main argument in general terms. During the second half of the 19th century, the distinction between knowledge as an *act* and knowledge as a *content* was a commonplace for philosophy and experimental psychology. While the former was mainly, although not always, defined using the concept of cognition (*Erkennen*), the latter was defined using the concept of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*). Whilst this distinction served many philosophers to define cognition in terms of a psychological act, Natorp claimed that the distinction cannot be maintained in the context of philosophy if we aim to analyse the epistemic role that lived experiences play in the production of objective contents of thinking. Natorp's argument is that the lived experience of knowledge is a particular kind or class of content of thought. The lived experience of knowledge cannot be different from its contents, for it cannot take place independently of contents themselves. Lived experience is not something we feel or enact before or after we define the content of an objective concept. Rather, it is something that occurs with, or in, contents of thought. In Natorp's view, lived experience is that which we, as concrete knowing subjects, *do* or *realize* whenever we undertake the task of forming the objective concepts that determine the object of experience.² As I explain in the following chapters, Natorp holds that lived experience expresses the epistemic process by means of which we recognize, adhere to, and finally justify for ourselves and other rational subjects the objective validity of our contents of thought. For this reason, Natorp identifies the concept of lived experience with the concept of consciousness. Consciousness defines the subjective direction of objective thinking, which Natorp also calls 'subjectivation' (*Subjektivierung*). The lived experience of objective knowledge, therefore, is the subjective-epistemic way in which consciousness is fulfilled in and by any concrete subject. In this respect, Natorp aims to demonstrate that lived experience is a general epistemic capacity that takes place in perception (*Wahrnehmung*) and that it contributes to two fundamental moments of the

² Let us consider, for example, the following passage, which Natorp reproduces in most of his texts on philosophical psychology: "Es ist daher eine Täuschung, wenn man, daß wir beim Wahrnehmen, Vorstellen, Denken usw. außer dem Bewußtsein des wahrgenommenen, vorgestellten, gedachten Inhalts noch ein besonderes Bewußtsein unseres Aktes des Wahrnehmens, Vorstellens, Denkens hätten, z. B. beim Hören eines Tons 1. ein Bewußtsein des Tons, 2. ein Bewußtsein des Hörens. Der Ton ertönt mir' und 'Ich höre den Ton', dies sind nicht zwei Tatsachen, sondern eine, nur auf zweierlei Art ausgedrückt nach den beiden daran unterscheidbaren Momenten, dem Dasein eines Inhalts, und seiner Beziehung auf das Ich. Der Inhalt ist, als Bewußtseinsinhalt, gar nicht da ohne sein Verhältnis zu dem Ich, für welches er da ist; und ebensowenig ist dies Verhältnis da ohne den Inhalt, der zum Ich in diesem Verhältnis steht. Die in der Psychologie vielfach behauptete Unterscheidung zwischen der Vorstellung eines Inhalts und der Vorstellung dieser Vorstellung beruht auf dem [...] Fehler, daß man die Bewußtheit oder Beziehung zum Ich vom Dasein des Inhalts zu isolieren und für sich gegenständlich zu machen versucht." (Natorp 1910a, 4–5).

process of knowledge: the concrete epistemic *realization* (*Erfüllung*) of objective contents, and the epistemic formation of the necessary condition of objective apperception (*Apperzeption*).

Whilst neo-Kantianism in general has become of interest in recent years, Natorp's philosophical psychology in particular has not been the object of systematic interpretation, specifically in view of the transcendental question of the conditions of validity of objective knowledge. On the one hand, the first revival of neo-Kantianism that took place during the second half of the 20th century focused mainly upon the logical contributions of Cohen and Cassirer, and to a lesser extent upon Natorp's transcendental logic. On the other, contemporary scholars have begun to address issues that go beyond the scope of systematic questions about the many versions of neo-Kantian philosophy. New questions about the history, the academic context, the political role of neo-Kantians, and specially the philosophical relation between neo-Kantians and other, more famous, German philosophers of the 20th century have increasingly been posed. Yet in this context, again, the question concerning Natorp's transcendental philosophy and particularly his philosophical psychology still requires attention.

It is not my aim here to offer an exhaustive review of the literature, which the reader can consult and judge herself. However, a general view of the way I understand the state of the art may help to accommodate my reading in the current academic landscape. I think that recent – and not so recent – literature on philosophical psychology can be divided into four general classes. First, literature concerned with historical and systematic issues regarding the Marburg School. On the one hand, (Marx 1964; Wolzogen 1984; Holzhey 1987; Renz 2002; Gigliotti 2005b; Heinz and Krijnen 2006; Pringe 2017; Edel 2010a; Luft 2015b) have contributed a great deal by analysing the systematic meaning and place of psychology in regard to Kant's and Cohen's transcendental philosophy. On the other, (Lembeck 1994; Gigliotti 2005b; A. Kim 2015; Lembeck 2019) have analysed the relation between Plato and Natorp in detail and contributed to our understanding of the historical reconstructions behind Natorp's general psychology, particularly his interpretation of the ancient word *psyche* and the early development of the concept of subjectivity (Natorp 1912a, 1–22). In general, I think these scholars have offered overall accounts of the systematic *place* of philosophical psychology in the system of philosophy. In this respect, it is possible to see that they all embrace the idea that Natorp understood

philosophical psychology as a *reverse* logic (Lembeck 1998). I agree with this thesis but I think that it needs to be clarified. Thus, in regard to this literature, my dissertation aims to further explain the content and contribution of the ‘reverse’ approach to psychology. Finally, (Edel 2002; Goubet 2010; Witzleben 2010; Pätzold and Krijnen 2002; Edel 2010b) show the conceptual relation between Natorp’s and other idealist philosophies, particularly those of Hegel and Fichte. All these contributions are significant if we are to understand the philosophical context in which Natorp produced the general psychology. Nevertheless, these interpretations address systematic and historical questions that exceed the horizon of the present research. When necessary, however, I refer to this literature to inform the reader of some idealist references in Natorp’s texts.

Second, scholars interested in the historical and philosophical relation between Natorp and other philosophers of his time. This kind of literature is the most copious by far. (Heidegger 2007; Pos 1925) are the first documented publications on this issue. Both philosophers analyse Natorp’s concept of consciousness and his method of reconstruction in comparison with Husserl’s phenomenology. Despite both recognizing the Natorpian and Husserlian projects as “pure science of subjectivity”, they tend to disregard the specific meaning and function of Natorp’s philosophical psychology. This hermeneutical tendency is reproduced by many scholars. (Kern 1964), for example, laid the foundation for interpreting Natorp’s psychology in comparison with Husserl’s genetic phenomenology advance the relation between Natorp and the phenomenological tradition, especially in regard to alleged similarities between the method of reconstruction, Husserl’s method of reduction, and Heidegger’s method of destruction (Y.-H. Kim 1974; Arlt 1985; Zahavi 2003; Luft 2010; Zahavi 2013; Dahlstrom 2015; Warren and Staiti 2015). In general, whilst these scholars discovered or emphasized many interesting historical links, they all assume without further ado that Natorp’s psychology is a sort of proto-phenomenology, the aim of which is to reconstruct lived experience as the immediacy of knowledge. This interpretation rests on a false assumption produced by the phenomenologically-motivated interest in Natorp’s work.³ In Chapter 3 I present a

³ In this respect, I consider the following passage to be the most exemplary result of this line of thought: “While Natorp is critical [toward] his own method and in the last step of his philosophical development moves toward a ‘general unifying logic’ –a doctrine of categories that unifies both objectifying and ‘subjectifying’ tendencies– it is, ironically, *Husserl* who actually carries out Natorp’s ‘grand vision’ of a truly philosophical psychology. Natorp’s method and conception of psychology proved a dead end for Natorp himself, but had a lasting importance for Husserl’s late conception of subjectivity, which needed to be framed in a genetic register in order to capture subjectivity’s ‘full concretion’. Husserl’s mature

different, even contrary, interpretation of the object and the method of reconstruction. Briefly, I argue that the object of psychology – lived experience – is neither the immediacy of something given nor the immediacy of a temporal lived experience of the given. On the contrary, the lived experience of neo-Kantian philosophical psychology is the epistemic capacity to form conceptual connections (*Verbindungen*) that makes possible the recognition of, adherence to, and commitment to the objective validity of our contents of thought.

Third, there are those scholars who trace the relation of analytical epistemology (particularly the so-called ‘Pittsburgh School’) back to Marburgian neo-Kantianism (Crowell 2009; Dewalque 2010; Renz 2011; Palette 2018). In particular, (Renz 2011) shows the epistemological correspondences between Cohen’s critical epistemology and Wilfrid Sellar’s conceptualism of mind and perception. (Dewalque 2010), on Sellar’s behalf, argues that Natorp’s transcendental logic of knowledge can be understood as a historical antecedent of analytical conceptualism. (Palette 2015; 2018) analyses the epistemological roots of the critique of the myth of the given in Natorp’s early psychology and philosophy, particularly in Natorp 1887). (Crowell 2009) does not deal with Natorp but he demonstrates the close relation between Emil Lask’s and John McDowell’s conceptualism. So, in view of this context, the interpretation I present may bring Natorp’s philosophical psychology closer to contemporary discussions of the conceptualism of perception. My aim, however, is not to demonstrate but to suggest. For this reason, throughout the dissertation I make reference to some similarities between critical epistemology and contemporary conceptualism in order to evoke or awake in the reader’s mind the proximity between philosophical psychology and the contemporary so-called ‘weak conceptualism’.⁴

phenomenology, thus, can rightfully be considered phenomenological *as well as* neo-Kantian [...] Husserl was able to adopt Natorpian elements because both shared in principle the same goal –to [analyze] the concreteness of subjectivity *without* succumbing to a pre-transcendental, naïve philosophy of ‘existence’. (Luft 2010, 62).

⁴ In this respect, I recommend considering John McDowell’s weak-conceptualism, the purpose of which is to define the proper content of perception (McDowell 2007; McDowell 2011; 2013a; 2013b; Bäckström 2017). In this respect, I invite the reader to compare the following passage with Chapter 3 of this dissertation: “A potential for discursive activity is already there in an intuition’s having its content. And one can exploit some of that potential in a knowledgeable judgment that redeploys some of the content of the intuition [...] When the ‘I think’ accompanies some content provided in an intuition, that yields a knowledgeable judgment that I am confronted by an object with such-and-such features. But being in a position to make such a judgment is being in a position to judge that there is an object with such-and-such features at such-and-such a location. One need not explicitly refer to oneself in a judgment whose status as

Finally, specific contributions in regard to Natorp's general psychology.

Two contributions are relevant here. On the one hand, A. Kim (2019) analyses Natorp's psychological concept of *consciousness*. I disagree with his interpretation for three reasons. First, the conceptual distinctions he develops makes things much more complicated than they really are. Second, Kim does not consider that Natorp's main texts on psychology follow the same problem (Natorp 1887; 1888b; 1912a), but interpret significant concepts in different and sometimes even contradictory ways. By contrast, I offer a systematic reconstruction of these texts that clearly shows how central concepts change, sometimes dramatically, from 1887 to 1912 – namely, 'lived experience', 'consciousness', 'time-consciousness', and 'connection'. Third, and this is the main reason why I disagree with Kim's interpretation, he misinterprets Natorp's concept of lived experience. Kim writes: "For Natorp, it is intentional consciousness that forms the basis of 'experience' (*Erfahrung*), in virtue of its objective intention. By contrast, 'minimal consciousness' exemplifies the limit-case of what he calls '*Erlebnis*', i.e., consciousness in its lived, subjective immediacy." (Kim 2019, 250). Kim goes on: "Critical psychology is the Penelopean project of undoing the knots and nodes at which determinate objects have been stitched into the tapestry of experience in order to reconstruct the antecedent stage of relatively indeterminate *Erlebnis*. I stress the word 'relatively' to indicate the narrow limits within which such an enterprise is possible" (259). As I show in §2 and §3 of Chapter 3, Natorp does not interpret the concept of lived experience in terms of the 'immediacy' of consciousness. Hence Natorp does not develop the concept of a 'minimal consciousness'. Furthermore, Natorp says quite the contrary to what Kim argues: critical psychology is *not* a "Penelopean project". Rather, as I explain in Chapter 3, critical psychology is the systematic definition of lived experience as the epistemic capacity of *forming conceptual connections* in order to construct *determinables* (*Bestimmbares*) for the production of possible objects of experience (Natorp 1912a, 80–81). On the other hand, (Christensen 2007) analyses the concept of 'self-consciousness' in Natorp's philosophical psychology. Christensen argues that Natorp's thesis about the impossibility of having objective knowledge of the I agrees with contemporary analytical interpretations of intentionality, particularly those of Davidson, Dretske, and Fodor.

knowledgeable depends on its being a discursive exploitation of some of the content of an intuition." (McDowell 2013a, 266).

Whilst Christensen offers a thorough analysis of this thesis, he is more interested in using Natorp's thesis to analyse the contemporary debate about intentionality, than in reconstructing Natorp's systematic arguments in view of the transcendental method. In this respect, my interpretation provides a detailed understanding of the critical-epistemological fundament of Natorp's concept of self-consciousness that may well contribute to Christensen's reading.

I believe that the current state of art invites and also makes it possible to address Natorp's philosophical psychology in order to clarify its epistemological contribution to the critical-epistemological (*erkenntniskritisch*) foundation of objective knowledge. Thus the principal aim of my dissertation is to reconstruct the critical-epistemological function of Natorp's *General Psychology* in view of the neo-Kantian project of transcendental philosophy. The reconstruction I offer can be further organized into three specific aims. First, to clarify the philosophical posture of Natorp's psychology in view of other psychological approaches of the time. Second, to show that the a priori-subjective conditions of perception are epistemic conditions for the recognition of, and commitment to, the validity of knowledge. Third, I argue that general psychology does promote an action-oriented epistemology of objective knowledge. In this respect, I believe that the ensuing dissertation may lay the foundation for future research on neo-Kantianism and its epistemological contribution to contemporary debates. In this, I agree with Wilfrid Sellars who claims that: "the history of philosophy is the *lingua franca* which makes communication between philosophers, at least of different points of view, possible. Philosophy without the history of philosophy, if not empty or blind, is at least dumb". (Sellars 1968, 1).⁵

The Methodology and Structure of the Dissertation

My analysis of philosophical psychology is based on the historical and systematic reconstruction of the concepts and texts that gave life to Natorp's *General Psychology according to the critical Method* from 1912. In particular, my reconstruction focuses upon

⁵ Natorp himself was of the same mind: "Das Tun der *Geschichte* scheint auf die Vergangenheit gerichtet; doch zielt es in Wahrheit vielmehr darauf, den lebensfähigen Gehalt der Vergangenheit für Gegenwart und Zukunft zu retten. Sie ist nicht — wie jener „Historismus“, gegen den Nietzsche streitet — beschäftigt, selbst als ein totes Ding, die Toten zu begraben, sondern vielmehr den tätigen Kräften des Lebens einen gewaltigen Zuwachs zu verschaffen, indem sie alle die „potentielle Energie“ lebendig zu machen strebt, die in der bisherigen Arbeit der humanen Kultur aufgesammelt worden ist.“ (Natorp 1908, 564).

the main argument behind this project – that about the epistemic role of lived experience – and it considers three significant aspects. First, the description of the *General Psychology* in view of its immediate context, namely, the context of academic discussion and debate about knowledge theory (*Erkenntnistheorie*) and experimental psychology during the second half of the 19th century. Second, the explanation of the main frame of philosophical psychology, namely, Natorp's critical epistemology of objective knowledge and, in particular, his interpretation and systematic appropriation of the so-called 'transcendental method'. Third, the systematic comparison and complementation of the argument of the 1912 treatise with other texts in which Natorp develops psychological themes, especially his academic lessons and his *Social Pedagogy*. In order to make things clear to the reader, each methodological step, as well as each particular aim of the dissertation, can be found in a particular chapter.

In sum, this dissertation is composed of four chapters. In regard to its form, all the chapters share the same structure. The first paragraph is an introduction, in which I offer a panoramic view of the main sections and arguments of the chapter. The middle paragraphs correspond to the conceptual elaboration of arguments and, in some cases, to the narration of historical information that I think is relevant to present the problem. The final paragraph concludes the chapter. The conclusion always consists of two parts: a brief summary of the argument and sections and the formulation of a question that invites the reader to the following chapter. In regard to the footnotes, they have three main purposes. Some shed light on significant debates in the contemporary epistemology of perception. Other footnotes refer to relevant literature in regard to systematic problems about Marburgian neo-Kantianism. Finally, there are footnotes that make explicit the contexts of the concepts I interpret or analyse, whether through quotes in the original language or references to other relevant texts.

Chapter 1 is entitled *The Era of the Critical Epistemology* and presents the historical and philosophical context of the Marburg School. I characterize the original development of the transcendental method by comparing Cohen's early epistemology with Hermann von Helmholtz' scientific epistemology of perception. I also explain in detail the mature development of the transcendental method, in order to introduce the question of a philosophical psychology. In this chapter, the reader will find the historical and philosophical elements to understand the emergence of neo-Kantianism and the

epistemological meaning and function of the transcendental method for the study of objective knowledge. Chapter 2 is entitled *The Possibility and Necessity of Philosophical Psychology* and it explains the first systematic formulation of philosophical psychology in regard to the transcendental method. First, I deal with Natorp's 1887 essay on the subjective foundation of knowledge. Thereafter I explain that the last development of this project is based on Natorp's genetic logic of 1910. Here the reader will find an accurate analysis of the transcendental argument of philosophical psychology. Also, through analysis of the Natorp-Husserl correspondence, I explain the philosophical reasons behind the unfortunate reception of Natorp's texts on psychology. Chapter 3 is entitled *The Epistemological Role of Philosophical Psychology* and it is the decisive chapter of the dissertation. Here I focus upon Natorp's systematic psychological reconstruction (*Rekonstruktion*) of the concept of lived experience. First is a detailed analysis of the relation between perception and lived experience. Then I explain that the epistemic role of lived experience is defined through the concept of 'potency' (*Potenz*). Unlike the standard literature, I argue that the introduction of this concept is the fundamental key to understanding the epistemic role of lived experience for the production of objective knowledge. Finally, I explain that the method of reconstruction consists in analysis of two structural epistemic functions of potency: the a priori levels in the epistemic production of potencies, and the a priori levels in the epistemic production of empirical and transcendental apperception. Chapter 4 is entitled *Social Pedagogy and the Complementation of Philosophical Psychology*. Here I argue that the first section of Natorp's *Social Pedagogy* contains a significant psychological analysis of the concepts of lived experience and potency. In particular, I hold that these analyses shed light on the epistemic subjective formation of a priori levels of apperception in any knowing subject. I call this the 'a priori-subjective formation' (*Bildung*) of the epistemic commitment to the a priori principle of thinking. Finally, the conclusion is entitled *Towards an Action-oriented Epistemology of Objective Knowledge* and it offers a brief final reflection on interpretation of the dissertation. As the title indicates, these concluding remarks aim to suggest that Natorp's critical epistemology may be understood as a transcendental analysis of the a priori conditions of the epistemic agency of rational beings.

