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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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Summary

Searching for the Concrete Subject. On the Epistemic Role of Lived-Experience in Paul Natorp's Critical Epistemology

The dissertation deals with Paul Natorp's *General Psychology according to the critical Method* from 1912. I argue that the general psychology makes a significant critical-epistemological (*erkenntniskritisch*) contribution to the main problem of the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism, namely, the question about the a priori conditions of validity (*Geltungsbedingungen*) of objective knowledge. Despite Natorp never completing the entire project of a philosophical psychology, I show that the last outline of this project does contain a novel and systematic enlargement of the neo-Kantian transcendental foundation 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 the attention on what I call its negative contribution, namely, Natorp's critique of the dispute concerning psychologism. Along with 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*). As such, I claim, Natorp's philosophical psychology from 1912 is the last systematic effort to define the epistemic role of a specific psychological component in the process of knowledge, namely, the perceptual *lived-*

experience (Erlebniss) of the production of objectively-valid knowledge. In concrete, my thesis is that perceptual lived-experience can be understood as the a priori subjective condition for the concrete and effective recognition (*Anerkennung*) and appropriation (*Aneignung*) of the objective validity of contents.

Besides the fact that the general psychology is an uncomplete project, there is the fact that most scholars interested in neo-Kantian psychology have assumed a phenomenological approach to assess Natorp's transcendental analysis of the lived-experience of objective knowledge. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that this approach does not allow for recognition of the proper content and goal of a critical psychology, such as Natorp depicted it in 1912. In order to unveil what I claim to be the proper "neo-Kantian" meaning of Natorp's psychology, I rather follow a conceptualist approach. According to this approach, the problem of the lived-experience of objective knowledge should not be understood as the problem of the *immediacy* of knowledge –as some phenomenologically-inspired scholars are used to assume. Rather, it should be understood in terms of the *epistemic role* that lived-experience plays in the process of concept formation.

To develop the main thesis of this dissertation, its four chapters unfold a story that goes from the most general aspects of the general psychology to its most detailed distinctions. Thus, on the one hand, in the first two chapters I explain the scientific and philosophical context in which Natorp developed his psychological analyses. In chapters 3 and 4, on the other hand, I analyze the Natorp's definition of the object and method of psychology, in order to reconstruct the systematic definition of the lived-experience as a subjective condition for the recognition and adherence to objectively-valid contents. In what follows, I give a synoptic explanation of these chapters.

In chapter 1, I introduce the epistemological problem of a philosophical psychology in accordance with critical epistemology. It is well known that Marburgian neo-Kantians argued time and again that the employment of experimental psychology in philosophy leads to many forms of psychologism. In order to understand the epistemological relevance of a neo-Kantian psychology, it is mandatory to be aware of the general epistemological goal of critical epistemology in its own terms. Therefore, in this chapter I offer a historically informed and systematic explanation of the neo-Kantian version of

transcendental philosophy, i.e. its philosophical framework and goal. I think that the correct understanding of the neo-Kantian community of work (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft*) may benefit from an explanation that takes into account the academic and institutional relevance a critical epistemology, for it emerged in response to the epistemological debates about the foundation of objective knowledge that took place in the milieu of the emergence and development of scientific discourse concerning knowledge from the second half of the 19th century. Thus, this chapter is divided in three main paragraphs. In §1 I contrast two forms of neo-Kantianism: Hermann von Helmholtz's theory of perception (§1.1) and Hermann Cohen's early and later critical epistemology (§1.2, §1.3). My aim here is to show that Cohen's idealist epistemology was oriented toward the solution of an epistemological riddle for the emerging physiology and experimental psychology: the transcendental foundation of the objective certainty (*Gewissheit*) or validity (*Geltung*) of knowledge. In §2 I explain the fundamental concepts of Cohen's critical epistemology. My aim here is to offer a clear picture of the so-called transcendental method and its object of analysis. In §3 I conclude by introducing the question of a philosophical psychology in accordance with critical epistemology. My aim here is to demonstrate that neo-Kantian epistemology has an epistemological need to develop a complementary philosophical psychology, the main question of which is how and in which sense a concrete subject may recognize or adhere to the validity of objective knowledge. Thus, chapter 1 contributes to a historically-informed and correct assessment of critical epistemology and, particularly, to the preliminary understanding of one of its least known projects to date: the epistemological project of a philosophical psychology.

In chapter 2, I explain the possibility and necessity of a philosophical psychology in accordance with critical epistemology. Despite the fact that Natorp wrote several texts on philosophy and psychology, the highly technical and incomplete development of his General Psychology has impeded a correct understanding. My principal aim in this chapter is to argue that Natorp's psychology can be understood as the subjective foundation of the *normativity* of objective knowledge. In order to understand how Natorp conceived this subjective-transcendental foundation, it is necessary to analyze the systematic development of his project. Thus, in §1 I present Natorp's early definition of philosophical psychology. My aim here is to show that Natorp's original plan is composed of two correlated but distinguishable projects: the critique of psychologism (§1.1) and the systematic development of a transcendental psychology (§1.2). In §2 I review and clarify

the two major philosophical problems for the reception and understanding of the latest version of the philosophical psychology from 1912. My aim here is to argue that a proper understanding of the critical psychology requires a clear understanding of Paul Natorp's genetic interpretation of the transcendental method. In §3, I explain the fundamental, genetic-logical concepts of philosophical psychology. My aim here is to offer a clear picture of Paul Natorp's interpretation of the epistemic act of objectivation. In §4, I conclude by explaining the systematic place and necessity of philosophical psychology in detail. My aim here is to show that philosophical psychology must analyze the subjective-conditions for the realization and recognition of the "fact of perception". Thus, chapter 2 contributes to a historically-informed and systematic explanation of critical psychology and, particularly, to the contemporary assessment of its main task and method.

In chapter 3, I show how Natorp conceives the critical-psychological foundation of the act of objectivation. My principal aim is to demonstrate that philosophical psychology provides an original and systematic explanation of the epistemic role of lived-experience (*Erlebniss*) of consciousness, because it describes the subjective epistemic capacities to recognize the objective validity of knowledge production. To do so, I offer a systematic reconstruction of the plan of the philosophical psychology from the viewpoint of its contents – namely, the object and method. The systematic reconstruction I propose is divided into five paragraphs. In §1 I analyze the epistemic relation between perception and the "ought" (*Sollen*) of legality, which brought us in the previous chapter to the "limit" of the genetic logic. Here I argue that the realization or concretization performed in perception presupposes that any concrete subject is in possession of epistemic capacities to recognize the effective validity of the objectifying conceptualization of thinking. In this respect, I claim that philosophical psychology effects the necessary change of perspective, from the "object of knowledge" to the "knowledge of the object", in order to unfold these capacities systematically. In §2 I offer a novel, critical interpretation of the "object" of the critical psychology. Against the phenomenological interpretation that understands the object of psychology as the "immediacy" of the given, I claim that Natorp defines the object of psychology in terms of a critical-epistemological model of consciousness, the purpose of which is to clarify the epistemic form and function of consciousness. My aim here is to show that Natorp defines the epistemic form of consciousness as the law-like subjective "connection" (*Verbindung*) of possible contents

of determination. In §3 I focus on the epistemic function of consciousness. My aim here is to explain that every connection of lived-experiences is part of an epistemic process of subjectivation (*Subjektivierung*), the main task of which is to turn such connections into the epistemic “potency” (*Potenz*) for the actualization of objectifying concepts. Thus, with the Aristotelean concept of “potency”, Natorp reinterprets the problem of the “concrete subject” in terms of the necessary “epistemic engagement” with the a priori principle of legality. In §4 I analyze the “reconstructive method” of psychology. Against the common interpretation that defines the reconstruction as a kind of de-objectivation (*Ent-Objektivierung*) of the object of knowledge, I claim that the reconstruction rather describes the necessary subjective construction of the object of knowledge. The preliminary and general results of this construction are what Natorp calls the *disposition* of the philosophical psychology. My aim here is to show that this section sheds light on the a priori structure of the two main provinces of the epistemic consciousness. First, it describes the epistemic levels for the construction of the “potency” of contents (§4.1). Second, it describes the egological levels of lived-unities (*Erlebnisseinheiten*) for the construction of the necessary epistemic engagement, from the unity of personal consciousness to the unity of transcendental consciousness (§4.2). Finally, in §5 I conclude that philosophical psychology does offer a systematic analysis of the a priori subjective conditions for the recognition of the normativity of thinking. Thus, chapter 3 contributes to a novel and correct interpretation of the systematic role of the philosophical psychology as an epistemology of perception. In this way, this chapter also leads us to chapter 4, in which I further explain the relation of philosophical psychology with the critical-epistemological contribution of Natorp’s Social Pedagogy.

In chapter 4, I analyze the epistemological contribution of Paul Natorp’s *Social Pedagogy* to the understanding of the unfinished project of the critical psychology. It is well-known that Natorp’s *Social Pedagogy* was received, first and foremost, as a concrete alternative to the pedagogical models of his time, which he intensely criticized for being based on a technical, too individualistic view of the cognitive abilities of human beings. Against this view, Natorp suggests defining pedagogy as the *science of formation* (*Bildung*), or more specifically, the science of the formation of humanity in ourselves. In this respect, many scholars have analyzed Natorp’s contribution to the history and philosophy of education. Less known, however, is the epistemological contribution of Natorp’s social pedagogy to his transcendental philosophy of objective knowledge. My principal aim is to demonstrate

that the social pedagogy, and particularly its so-called critical-epistemological foundation, may be read as an action-oriented epistemology that describes objective knowledge in terms of the epistemic agency of rational beings. In this respect, I argue for the mutual influence of critical epistemology and social pedagogy, which reveals a systematic development of the main argument of the critical psychology. Thus, in §1 I describe the systematic place and function of the SP. In particular, I focus on Natorp's deduction of the concept of education from the a priori principle of self-consciousness. In this respect, I claim that Natorp understands education as the subjective realization of the idea of humanity. In §2, I demonstrate the systematic relation between critical psychology and social pedagogy. First, I explain the function of psychology in the context of the social pedagogy, especially in regard to the concept of "tendency" as the a priori form of the movement of consciousness. Second, in §2.1, I show that the epistemic levels of the formative experience coincide with the epistemic levels of the potency. Third, in §2.2, I demonstrate that social pedagogy not only follows Natorp's critical psychology, but also complements it with the analysis of the "formation of the will". Finally, in §3 I conclude that this reading of the SP may provide a better understanding of Natorp's epistemology of objective knowledge, by putting forward relevant concepts to analyze knowledge in terms of "rational agency". In this respect, I conclude by claiming that Natorp's critical epistemology can be understood, from its very beginning in the genetic logic to its final development in the critical psychology, as an action-oriented epistemology of objective knowledge.

Finally, in the conclusion, I claim that Natorp's transcendental philosophy may be understood as an action-oriented epistemology of objective knowledge. Based on the results of the present investigation, I think that the *General Psychology* is the philosophical project that breaks with the strictly logical direction of the Marburg School. The critical dissolution of the metaphysical dualism of object and subject allows us to understand the "lived-experience" of knowledge as the immanent and correlative formation of object and subject in the infinite task of leading to concretion the a priori act of thinking. In this respect, Natorp discovers the normative-agential foundation of the critical concept of objective knowledge. More specifically, by considering the analyses of this dissertation, I think that it is possible to identify this foundation or orientation in the epistemic process of the lived-experience of the concrete knowing subject. And, by extension, it is also possible to recognize the systematic place of the lived-fundament of

objective knowledge in the entire critical-epistemological model of the act of thinking (*Denken*). Thus, the question of lived-experience might not be relevant for a sheer logic of objective knowledge, but it is absolutely necessary to describe how any concrete subject *recognizes* objectively-valid contents and how she *learns* to think objectively about the world.