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Paul Natorp's reformulation of the Kantian distinction between intuition and concept

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Citation

Pelegriin, L. A. (2023, July 6). *Paul Natorp's reformulation of the Kantian distinction between intuition and concept*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3629812>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Introduction

In his letter to Marcus Herz on February 21, 1772, Kant introduces the general problem of knowledge by the following question: "... on what foundation rests the relationship of what we call representation in us with the object?"¹ According to Kant, it is necessary to justify how the human mind represents objects. More specifically, the problem is how our thinking can *legitimately* be related to what it represents. In this letter, Kant argues that one of the main tasks of philosophy is to explain how thinking can have a reference to objects. The Kantian answer to this question is that thinking requires two types of representations: intuitions and concepts. The intuition is a singular representation, and the concept is a universal representation. Concepts abstract the marks that many objects have in common while intuitions refer to singular things. Our thinking can relate to objects only through intuition, because singular things are completely determined. There can be complete determinate cognitions only as intuitions (not as concepts). In relation to intuition, the logical determination can be complete but in regard to concepts, it can never be fully achieved. In the conceptual representation, the complete determination can never be accomplished². Concepts are, *per definitionem*, abstractive representations. Concepts contain partial marks of the objects. For this reason, the possible reference of thinking to the thoroughly determined individual requires intuition. According to Kant, intuitions are given while concepts are products of the understanding. Thus, if our understanding produces only universal representations (concepts), how can it *legitimately* be related to singular objects? if our intellect knows things only through concepts (universal representations), how does it know singular things? The Kantian answer to this question rests on his distinction between intuitions and concepts.

In the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant introduces this fundamental distinction of critical idealism. Sensibility provides intuitions while the understanding is the source of concepts. This differentiation between intuitions and concepts as two different products of heterogeneous faculties introduced in the very beginning of the *Critique* is the pillar upon which the critical philosophy rests³. In the arguments developed in the

¹ Kant, I., AA X: 130.

² Kant, I., AA IX: 99.

³ As Lorne Falkenstein marks: "This 'two-faculty' account of cognition' lies at the foundation of his theoretical philosophy, and almost everything he has to say in the *Critique of Pure Reason* presupposes it."

Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant uses the definitions of the notions of intuitions and concepts as premises for his arguments. Through intuitions, thinking can have an immediate reference to objects. The intuitions are provided by sensibility, which is the capacity to be affected. The sensibility is the faculty of receptivity by which we receive representations. According to these first lines of the Transcendental Aesthetic, the objects affect our minds and provide us with intuitions. In contrast to intuitions, concepts are a product of the understanding. The understanding by its own means generates concepts. Through intuition, the objects are given; through the understanding, the objects are thought. The mind is *affected* and receives the matter for the formation of the representation. Thus, the sensibility (as receptivity) provides us with intuitions. Scholars agree that in these first passages of the Aesthetic, Kant is providing a series of definitions. Commentators consider that these statements are not conclusions of any previous argument provided by Kant in this section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*⁴. In effect, this exegetical tradition may differ in the details of their interpretations. However, for all of them, there is not really an argumentative structure in these first passages. For this reason, the distinction between intuitions and concepts has been considered as one of the weakest points of the Kantian system⁵. The Kantian dichotomies introduced in the first section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* have been strongly questioned by various contemporary scholars and different philosophical schools developed their own systems in an attempt to overcome this dualism.

Marburg Neo-Kantianism proposes as one of the pillars of their “return to Kant” a new approach to the dualism between intuitions and concepts. One of the main goals of the Neo-Kantian Marburg school is to overcome this Kantian dualism between intuitions and concepts⁶. While for Kant, intuitions and concepts have their origin in different faculties of the human mind, Marburg Neo-Kantianism redefine these notions as modes of thinking. According to Paul Natorp, one of the founders of the school, the conception according to which the object is determined by two factors - intuitions and concepts - is

Falkenstein, L., 1991, p.165. Also: Brandt, R. 1998, p. 81. Smyth, D., 2014, p.1. Gloy, K., 1984, p.1. Willaschek, M.; 2015, p.129.

⁴ Cf. Caimi, M., 1996, p.27. Kolb, D., 1992, p. 244. Kemp Smith, N., 1918, p.79n. Vaihinger, H., 1892, p.1. Parsons, C.; 1992, p. 66. Falkenstein, L., 1995, p.28 ss. Strawson, P. F; 1966, p.23. Pippin, R., 1982, p. 32. Willaschek, M., 2015, p.129.

⁵ Kolb, D., 1986, p. 223.

⁶ Cf. Ferrari, M, 1997, p. 118. Dufour, É.; 2003, p.90. Giovanelli, M., 2005, p.116. Munk, R. 2005, p. 8. Holzhey, H., 2010, p.25. Giovanelli, M., 2011, p. 217. Mormann, T.; 2013, p. 241. Malter, R., and Hamilton H. H. Beck, 1981, p. 539. Krijnen, C., 2013, p. 168. Warren, N., 2015, p. 90. This is the core of Cohen’s position. Cf. Pringe, H., 2020, pp.137 ss.

an assumption inherited from Aristotelian realism. The position that affirms that there are determinations of the object that thinking cannot provide by its own means is an inheritance from Aristotle's metaphysics. For Natorp, Plato would have been the first to demonstrate that thinking is not dependent on objects. On the contrary, objects are dependent on thinking. In this sense, Plato was the first idealist philosopher⁷. Aristotle gave a realistic interpretation of the theory of ideas, far from the spirit of the theory of Plato⁸. The debate between Plato and Aristotle is the controversy between idealism and realism⁹, and realism is, as Christian Krijnen holds, the "real antagonist" of Neo-Kantianism¹⁰. Natorp considers that the idealism of René Descartes tried to overcome the dualism between intuition and concepts, and Kant followed this line. However, neither Descartes nor Kant were deep enough in their approaches. After all, Descartes fell into a gross dualism too¹¹. Even in the Cartesian idealist philosophy, there is always an element of experience that thinking cannot provide from its own source. The object is a strange element for knowledge. Cartesian idealism recovers the task begun by Plato. However, in the system of Descartes, the naive belief in the existence of the object, which exists in itself before all knowledge, and to be grasped by the mind remains unchanged¹². The overcoming of dualism between intuition and concepts was not carried out either by Descartes or by Kant. Kantian idealism failed to show the way in which thinking is the

⁷ Natorp, P., PILb, p.459., Cohen, H., 1902 p.13. Cf. Serón, D., 2012, p.3; Reale, G., 1999, p. xi. Cohen and Natorp agree to see in Plato the founder of idealism. Cf. Serón, D., 2012, p. 3. As Andrea Poma notes: "Plato occupied a place of equal importance to that attributed to Kant, and that the former's influence on Marburg philosophy was in no way inferior to that of the latter". Poma, A., 2006, p. 22.

⁸ Natorp, P., PILb, p.147,445. Cf. Reale, G., 1999, p. xxiv. Aguilar Martínez, E., 2014, p.227. Fronterotta, F., 2000, p.324.

⁹ Natorp, P., USOB, p.276 ss., PILb, pp.147, 388, 445. Cf. Poma, A., 2006, p. 30.

¹⁰ Krijnen claims: „Namentlich der Realismus entpuppt sich im Zuge der Entwicklung ihrer Erkenntnisauffassung als der eigentliche Gegenspieler.“ Krijnen, C., 2014, p.12. In this line, Geert Edel explains: „Für Cohen gibt es „eigentlich nur zwei Gegensätze in aller Philosophie und Wissenschaft: Idealismus und Eklektizismus“. (*LrE* 595) Im Bannkreis der analytischen Philosophie dagegen ist der Idealismus gleichsam nicht satisfaktionsfähig: es gehört hier fast schon zum guten Ton, dass man eine Theorie entwickelt oder verteidigt, die 'empiristisch', 'materialistisch', 'naturalistisch', kurz, die 'realistisch', auf keinen Fall aber 'idealistisch' ist.“ And then, he poses the following question: „Warum also, wenn die Dinge so klar, die Standpunkte so unvereinbar sind, jenem Zusammenhang überhaupt nachgehen? Kann denn dabei etwas philosophisch Belangvolles herauskommen?“ Edel, G. 1993, p.179.

¹¹ „Aber schließlich fällt Descartes in den groben Dualismus zurück.“ Natorp, P., DED, p. 18.

¹² „Vielleicht wendet man ein, dass selbst bei Kant dieser Dualismus keineswegs ganz überwunden sei, dass neben dem in der Erkenntnis rein erzeugten doch noch etwas wie ein „gegebener“ Gegenstand übrig bleibe. Allein das ist bei ihm bloß ein rudimentärer Rest einer in der Hauptsache verlassenen Stufe des Philosophirens; ein Rest, der auf der Höhe des Systems verschwindet. Bei Descartes im Gegenteil ist der erste Ansatz rein und folgerecht, aber daneben wuchert das naive Vorurteil des an sich vor aller Erkenntnis vorhandenen und nun zu erfassenden Gegenstandes ungestört weiter, um endlich auch jenen richtigeren Ansatz zu überwuchern und sich auf der Höhe der Entwicklung des Philosophen, in seiner Metaphysik, zum System zu verhärten.“ Natorp, P., DED, p.19.

producer of objectivity. The task of developing a coherent idealism remains. At the very beginning of the *Logical Foundations of the Exact Sciences*, Natorp argues:

Die nachfolgende, von Kant ausgegangene Philosophie, auch die gegenwärtige, nichts weniger als orthodoxe neukantische Richtung hat an den Dualismus von reiner Anschauung und reinem Denken mehr und mehr Anstoß genommen und endlich entschlossen mit ihm gebrochen. Vielleicht schon etwas zu entschlossen; denn daß in Kants Begriff der Anschauung sich ein keinesfalls zu vernachlässigendes Problem barg, davon werden wir uns bald überzeugen. Aber vorerst war es durch das eigene Prinzip der Kantischen Transzendentalphilosophie gefordert, daß man, was bei Kant zum wenigsten mißverständlich in die zwei Faktoren: reine Anschauung und reines Denken zerlegt wird, in strenger Einheit wieder zusammennahm und als ein Einziges, für das man den Namen des „reinen Denkens“ unbedenklich festhalten kann, zu verstehen suchte.¹³

The position of Natorp is two-fold. On the one hand, he claims that it is necessary to overcome the heterogeneity between intuitions and concepts introduced by Kant. On the other hand, he considers that it must be shown the role that intuition plays in the process of thinking. According to him, philosophers failed in accomplishing these tasks. The philosophical efforts of his contemporaries to overcome the dualism were infertile, since they were grounded on the basis of this Kantian error, which - ultimately - was rooted on Aristotelian naive realism. The attempts of his contemporaries to overcome the dichotomy were fruitless. Thus, the problem of how a cognition may refer to objects is introduced in concomitance with the possibility of accomplishing a genuine idealism. A coherent idealism can only be achieved by exhibiting the way in which thinking can be the source of objectivity. The Kantian approach of how thinking can refer to objects must be reformulated in terms of how thinking can produce the object in its singularity. The problem of the determination of the singular object is introduced with the problem of the possibility of the prosecution of a genuine idealism.

In this context of the problem, the goal of our research is to analyze Natorp's redefinition of the distinction between intuitions and concepts in relation to his conception

¹³ Natorp, P., LGEW, p. 2. Also: KMS, p.202.

of the method of philosophy. We will exhibit the connection between the way in which Natorp redefines the Kantian dichotomy and his conception of the method of philosophy. We will show how a new position regarding the problem of the method leads to a new conception of the way in which thinking relates to the object in its singularity. We will investigate how Natorp introduces his position in dialogue with Kant's position and with contemporary approaches to the problem, psychologism and logicism. We will argue that the question of how a cognition may refer to the object requires rethinking the method of philosophy. It will be shown that the Kantian question of how thinking can have reference to objects was badly posed. The question is how the understanding can be the source of objectivity and not how it relates to the objects. We will study the arguments that led Natorp to argue that the object is the result of a construction of the understanding. This is the only approach to the problem consistent with critical idealism¹⁴. The hypothesis of this investigation is that Natorp's redefinition of the distinction between intuitions and concepts is based on a new conception of the philosophical method. Our aim is to show that the way in which Paul Natorp understands the notions of intuition and concept is grounded on his conception of the problem of method. We expect to exhibit that the criticism of psychologism and logicism are the pillars on which the new conception of the distinction between intuitions and concepts is based.

Our research will be divided into five main chapters. In the first chapter, we will make a brief study of the distinction between intuitions and concepts in the philosophy of Kant. We will investigate how Kant inherited these notions from rationalism and reinterpreted their meaning. We will present an overview of the meanings of these terms before Kant. Second, we will study the Kantian argument of incongruent counterparts. We will show that the intuition is introduced in order to satisfy the requirement of the complete determination of the object. Finally, we will study the reference of intuition to affection as a result of the consideration of the imperfection of our thinking. We will conclude that the reference to the intuition is one of the marks of our finitude. According to Kant, a finite being may have legitimate representations of objects only through

¹⁴ In this sense, as Christian Krijnen notes, the question of how the mind can have reference to objects assumes, even in its contemporary formulations, the assumption of naive realism. He states: „Die erkenntnistheoretische Grundfrage lautet für sie ihrem geltungsidealistischen Ansatz gemäss nicht wie im älteren Empirismus und in dessen neueren Varianten: Wie kann das ‚Subjekt‘ (‚Ich‘, ‚Bewusstsein‘, ‚mind‘, usw.) ein von ihm unabhängiges ‚Objekt‘ (‚Aussenwelt‘, ‚äusseren Gegenstand‘, ‚world‘ usw.) erkennen? Sie lehnen nämlich die Voraussetzung dieser Frage ab: die ursprüngliche Unverbundenheit von (erkennendem) Subjekt und Objekt. Dieser Getrenntheit von Subjekt und Objekt geht den Neukantianern zufolge eine ursprüngliche Verbundenheit beider in der Erkenntnisrelation voraus.“ Krijnen, C., 2014, p. 16.

intuition. In the second chapter, we will study Natorp's arguments that highlight the deficiencies of the proposals of psychologism and logicism. We will exhibit that these considerations led Natorp to reformulate the Kantian distinction between intuitions and concepts. We will study how Natorp presents his proposal in dialogue with these philosophical tendencies. These schools misunderstood the problem of the relation of concepts and intuitions. We will exhibit that both currents have a wrong conception of the relationship between intuitions and concepts due to methodological errors. Natorp will show that both positions are unsuccessful to explain the issues raised by Kant. We will conclude that it is necessary to reformulate the notions of intuition and concept. In the third chapter, we will study Natorp's position on the object and method of philosophy. We will focus on his definition of thinking as correlation. We will argue that this new starting point will be the clue to solve the problems raised by the Kantian distinction between intuitions and concepts. In Chapter 4, we will analyze the way in which Natorp defines the notions of intuition and concept starting from his deduction of categories. In this chapter, we will find the clue to understanding how Natorp conceives the relationship between intuitive and conceptual representations. We will analyze the specific development of the process by which the object is constructed *in* and *by* thinking. We will exhibit the place that the concepts of space and time play as forms of thinking and, more specifically, as modes of the category of relation. The general goal of this section is to highlight how Natorp's proposal overcomes the heterogeneity between intuitions and concepts, by proving that the object is a construction and not something given. In the deduction of categories, it must be shown that the understanding does not need any reference to intuition in the process of knowledge. In chapter five, we will study Natorp's new definition of the distinction between intuitions and concepts. According to this new definition, intuition will be considered as the always distant goal to which knowledge aims. The singular completely determined object is the goal that can never be reached. It will be shown that the expression of the imperfection of knowledge is exhibited at this point. Second, we will analyze Natorp's definition of the notion of concept. We will argue that the Kantian definition of the notion of concept is insufficient to explain the productive nature of concepts. Finally, we expect to exhibit the new answer to the Kantian problem of the foundation of the relation of the representation with the object. We will show that the answer to the Kantian question relies on the exhibition of the functional character of concepts.

