

**Review of Christian Damböck, *Deutscher Empirismus: Studien zur Philosophie im deutschsprachigen Raum 1830-1930***

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In R. Schuster (ed), *The Vienna Circle in Czechoslovakia*, Vienna Circle Yearbook 23, 2020: 185-190

Recently, a small but growing literature has started to fill the gap in our understanding of mid and late nineteenth-century German philosophy. But entrenched historiographical narratives suggest nothing much of interest happened in German-language philosophy after Hegel and before Nietzsche and Frege. So why should philosophers care about that period? Christian Damböck's *Deutscher Empirismus: Studien zur Philosophie im deutschsprachigen Raum 1830-1930* presents an argument for an unambiguous answer to that question, and one that matters for contemporary analytic philosophy. Naturalism in analytic philosophy, especially in philosophy of science, often seems in the grip of an over-emphasis on the methods and results of the natural sciences, as opposed to the humanities and social sciences. This can lead to the neglect of and difficulty making sense of those matters dealt with by the humanities and social sciences. For example, we have a rich and mature literature on natural kinds, but only a comparatively limited and as yet immature understanding of social kinds. Damböck's account of a tradition he calls German empiricism serves to illustrate what philosophy might look like if it took seriously the idea that knowledge is always embedded within a cultural and historical context, and thus that the theory of knowledge must be informed by those disciplines concerned with culture and history, namely, the Geisteswissenschaften.

Damböck's account begins with the observation that that from 1830 to 1880, most of the most important scholarly advances in Germany were in the Geisteswissenschaften: for example, the rise of classical philology, political economy, and and the beginnings of sociology (22-26). While natural scientific sensory physiology and experimental psychology also made important progress in that period, even they were concerned with the human mind and cognitive processes. German empiricism was the philosophical response to those advances.

As Damböck characterizes it, German empiricism seems to be the conjunction of four theses. First, philosophy must explain knowledge by appeal to some conceptual apparatus of abstract system akin to Kant's categories (35, 67). Second, that conceptual apparatus or system must itself be explained by appeal to the domain of the spiritual -- that is, culture and history (35, 54, 66-7). Third, culture and history, and so the domain of the spiritual, are not accessible to a priori speculation. Instead, they can be investigated only by attending to actual, contingent facts available to systematic empirical investigation. That is why German empiricism is *empiricism*. A point that Damböck emphasizes follows from these first three theses: on German empiricism, for any object, there is no uniquely correct representation of the object independent of its cultural and historical context (35-6). The final thesis of German empiricism is that culture and history are explanatorily autonomous from the psychology of individual minds. Consequently, the Geisteswissenschaften cannot be reduced to a natural scientific psychology of individual minds. Thus for Damböck, German empiricism entails the rejection of a classical empiricism that seeks to explain all knowledge by appeal to sensations and laws governing them in individual minds (70).

Damböck traces the development and articulation of this view through four chapters about philosophy in Berlin in the decades following Hegel's death, Wilhelm Dilthey, Hermann Cohen, and the young Rudolf Carnap. He makes a persuasive case that, for example, Heymann Steinthal and Dilthey are German empiricists in his sense. How well Cohen and Carnap fit the mould is likely to be more controversial.

Damböck's first chapter sets the scene in which German empiricism emerged and offers accounts of the views of August Boeckh, F.E. Beneke, Adolf Trendelenburg, and Heymann Steinthal. While Beneke and Trendelenburg have received some recent attention, Damböck's accounts of Boeckh and Steinthal move into territory that is so far mostly uncharted in the secondary literature. His aim is to trace the development of German empiricism in these figures' work. The picture that emerges is not one of German empiricism springing fully formed in the 1830s immediately after Hegel's death. Rather, on Damböck's account, different elements of the doctrine emerged at different points in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

Damböck's interpretations of Boeckh, Beneke, and Trendelenburg suggest that these figures defend only key elements of German empiricism, rather than the whole doctrine. On Damböck's account, both Boeckh and Beneke reject classical empiricism and its view that all knowledge can be explained by appeal directly to sensation. Rather, for them philosophy must explain knowledge by appeal to some conceptual apparatus akin to Kant's categories. But then, that conceptual apparatus itself must be grounded empirically: for Boeckh, by inductively testing it against experience (56); and for Beneke, by explaining it by appeal to the psychology of inner experience in the subject (61). Trendelenburg takes the important step of allowing that history is a part of the empirical context that explains knowledge (65).

In Steinthal, we first see German empiricism in something like its full-fledged form. Here we first find the domain of the empirical extended to include culture and history. At the centre of Steinthal's theory of knowledge is the idea of a "mechanics of consciousness." It is the cognitive apparatus necessary to explain the possibility of knowledge. Crucially, the mechanics of consciousness is not a function exclusively of individual minds. It extends to the cultural, or in Steinthal's terms, the spiritual. Damböck's interpretation of Steinthal differs from Frederick Beiser's recent interpretation in a way that is important for Damböck's claim that Steinthal as a German empiricist. Beiser argues that Steinthal's account of the spiritual domain is intelligible in mechanical terms (Beiser 2014: 468). But Damböck argues (persuasively, in my view) that, for Steinthal, an account of the "mechanics of consciousness" of spirit cannot be reduced to mechanistic processes in the minds of individuals. In Steinthal, we thus have the view that knowledge must ultimately be explained by the empirical investigation of culture and history, and that the cultural domain cannot be reduced to psychological processes in individual minds (70).

Damböck's Dilthey chapter makes the case that although Dilthey's views changed and evolved in many ways over the course of his career, there is a constant thread that unifies his early and late work. That thread, Damböck argues, is German empiricism. For Dilthey, as for Kant, human knowledge has a conceptual basis that makes experience possible. But for Dilthey, that basis can be understood only by attending to the spiritual, that is, to human history and culture. Thus Dilthey conceived of his project as a Critique of Historical Reason and the Geisteswissenschaften play an essential role in that project (77-8).

Damböck traces the different elements of this view through Dilthey's writings. For example, in his early *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Dilthey objects to the likes of Comte and Mill that they are insufficiently empiricist, since in failing to recognize the historical dimension of Geist they hypostatize allegedly universal laws of human knowledge (76-7). A similar idea plays a role in Dilthey's distinction between explanatory and descriptive psychology: explanatory psychology has its roots in Mill's associationistic psychology, and seeks to explain mental phenomena by reference to fixed or unchanging representations of sensory images (86). But Dilthey denies that there can be any such unchanging representations independently of history. In his late *Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, Dilthey articulates a conception of "objective spirit" that rejects Hegel's absolute idealism in favour of a view that sees spirit objectified in concrete historical events and artifacts that can be studied empirically (91).

Further, Damböck argues that Dilthey's German empiricism manifests itself in his complex account of the relation between, on the one hand, the Geisteswissenschaften and their objects, and on the other hand, the natural sciences and their objects. Dilthey rejects Wilhelm Windelband's hard distinction between how the natural and human sciences form their concepts. As Damböck puts it, for Dilthey the distinction between the two kinds of science is "gradual": the natural sciences prepare the ground for the Geisteswissenschaften (94). He insists that the concepts developed by hermeneutics of descriptive psychology have an explanatory autonomy that cannot be reduced to the concepts of, for example, individual, natural scientific psychology.

Damböck's chapter on Cohen is full of original interpretive claims that challenge a number of orthodox points in the Cohen literature -- too many for me to enumerate here. But

what is most valuable about the chapter is how squarely it confronts one of the central puzzles of Cohen's theoretical philosophy: the tension between his commitment to a transcendental method that discovers a priori principles that, Cohen suggests, have a universal validity and his view that philosophy must attend to knowledge as it changes and evolves through history. Damböck's thesis that Cohen is a German empiricist requires him to weigh the second of these commitments more heavily than the first.

Central to Damböck's interpretation is his account of Cohen's transcendental method. For Cohen, the transcendental method discovers a priori principles contained within experience that systematically connect together different elements of that experience. Those elements are always incomplete and change over the course of the history of science (142). But the elements of experience are unified by the principles that philosophy discovers using the transcendental method, because for Cohen those principles are expressions of the law of continuity, which brings constancy to disparate elements of experience (144). The law of continuity does that because, for Cohen, it is itself an expression of reason (144-5). But crucially, Damböck argues that Cohen's conceptions of continuity and reason are impossible to separate from their cultural and historical contexts. For, on Damböck's account, reason is not some formalism abstracted from culture. Rather, it provides an intersubjective foundation for knowledge by making systematic connections between elements of experience intelligible to *us* -- that is, to our *culture* (156). Thus on Damböck's interpretation, the a priori principles that Cohen's transcendental method seeks to discover ultimately derive their status as rational and intersubjective, and so too objective, from culture.

This interpretation of Cohen has the virtue of providing a clear explanation of why, for Cohen, a philosophical account of scientific knowledge must be embedded in a broader philosophical account of ethics, politics, and religion, which for Cohen are central constituents of culture.

At the same time, this interpretation of Cohen seems not to do justice to some of the central commitments of his theory of knowledge. For Cohen, reason and the law of continuity are universally valid. The unity that they ground in experience is universally valid. Damböck attempts to accommodate this commitment of Cohen's by attributing to him the view that a singular, constant conception of reason will emerge from any sufficiently developed culture (144). But this seems an implausible commitment: for if continuity and reason have their ground in culture, why wouldn't they be as variable and subject to evolution as the cultures that ground them?

We could solve this interpretive problem by saying: for Cohen, human expressions of reason and continuity evolve through history, and that philosophers' only access to reason and continuity comes from attending to that historical progress; further, Cohen also thinks that reason and continuity are not grounded by and do not derive their validity from their changing expressions at different points in history, since their validity is ultimately universal. However, if we interpret Cohen this way, he no longer appears to be a German empiricist in Damböck's sense, since on this view, the validity of reason and continuity is ultimately independent of their historical contexts. In short, the genuine universal validity that Cohen assigns to reason and continuity seems not to fit the mould of German empiricism.

Damböck's final chapter is a detailed examination of Carnap's view of the relation between politics and theoretical philosophy in the 1910s and 1920s, and especially in his *Der logische Aufbau der Welt*. Building on what is now a very mature Carnap literature, Damböck has uncovered a wealth of fascinating detail about Carnap's earliest work. He argues, for example, that underpinning Carnap's interactions with the Bauhaus design school was a shared emotional commitment to "community well-being" (200), and that we can recognize the aesthetic commitments of the *Aufbau* only when we realize that Carnap's aesthetics were not literary but architectural (205-6).

However, Damböck's principal aim in the chapter is to argue that Carnap's early work bears traces of the German empiricist tradition, even if Carnap comes sometime after the main period of the tradition. He argues that throughout Carnap's early life and while he was writing the *Aufbau*, he was preoccupied by political and cultural concerns. Of course, Carnap famously announced his political and social concerns in the polemical preface to the *Aufbau*. But Damböck is at pains to spell out the details of exactly how those political and social concerns shaped Carnap's theoretical philosophy in the *Aufbau* in significant ways. Most importantly, Damböck argues, Carnap wanted the conception of objectivity and intersubjectivity he articulates in the *Aufbau* to establish a universally communicable basis for making claims about value. On Damböck's account, Carnap thought that shared basis would eventually encourage socialist politics, by "reforming" the "irrational side of our lives" (199)

Damböck's account of the young Carnap's thinking is valuable for the richness of its historical detail. But it is unclear how well Carnap fits into the tradition of German empiricism in Damböck's sense. One concern is that the *Aufbau*'s conception of value and culture is explicitly

reductionist: for Carnap, the heteropsychological domain is reducible to the physical, which is in turn reducible to the autopsychological. That view stands in stark contrast to Steinthal's and Dilthey's view that the spiritual domain is not reducible to psychological processes in individual minds.

But perhaps more fundamentally, the relation Carnap sees between theoretical philosophy and culture seems very different than the relations Steinthal and Dilthey see, and that Damböck characterizes as the core of German empiricism. For Steinthal and Dilthey (and for Cohen on Damböck's interpretation of him) there are necessary conditions of the possibility of knowledge and experience, and those necessary conditions are explained for the theory of knowledge only by reference to history or culture. But as Damböck shows, Carnap in the *Aufbau* does not argue that philosophy needs to appeal to history, culture, or politics for the purpose of providing an epistemological explanation of knowledge. Rather he conceives of his epistemology as in the service of specific, partisan political aims. For Carnap, politics and culture provide the *motivation* for doing theoretical philosophy. But for the German empiricists, at least in the cases of Steinthal and Dilthey, theoretical philosophy appeals to culture to *explain* knowledge.

Leaving aside concerns about how well Cohen and Carnap fit into the tradition of German empiricism, Damböck's chapters on both contain a wealth of detail deeply-researched detail that will be of interest to specialists. Moreover, those concerns do not weaken Damböck's principal contention that German empiricism is a tradition worth taking seriously. Indeed, it seems to me to be a useful frame for understanding not just Steinthal's and Dilthey's philosophies, but also the philosophy of, for example, Wilhelm Wundt, another figure concerned with the role of history and culture in explaining knowledge who deserves more attention than he

has received from historians of philosophy. The usefulness of the idea of German empiricism ensures that Damböck's book will be of interest, not just to specialists, but to any philosophers who want to take the Geisteswissenschaften seriously, or who want to develop a naturalism inclusive enough to countenance the methods of history and the social sciences in the theory of knowledge.

*Works cited*

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