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Epistemology¹

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From the moment Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) declared that “nature” was nothing but the whole of experience, and that any enquiry into nature first required a critical assessment of the necessary preconditions and limitations of experience, many philosophers began to see it as their central task to provide the sciences with their epistemological foundations. In the nineteenth century, however, the Kantian self-understanding of the philosopher was also challenged from various sides. For example, the institutionalization of history as a scientific discipline raised the question: How can the philosopher’s methodologies of critique and of transcendental deduction be reconciled with the insight that all of life on earth, including the philosopher’s own standpoint, is thoroughly historical? Furthermore, various natural sciences posed their own challenges to philosophy, for example by uncovering the psycho-physiological processes within human cognition, and by stressing the very earthly and material nature of the soul (and thus presumably also of the “transcendental subject”). From within Kant’s transcendental philosophy, many of these challenges seemed easy to block. Within the scientific community as well as the general (and rapidly expanding) reading public, however, these Kantian defenses appeared less and less convincing as the century progressed.

Key expressions of this tension in the nineteenth century, between philosophical epistemology and scientific practice, were the “materialism debate” and the “psychologism debate”. While in the 1840s, philosophers increasingly gave up their Hegelian certainties about history as the self-realization of absolute spirit, physiologists like Karl Vogt (1817–1895) and Ludwig Büchner (1824–1899) argued that the functions of “*Geist*” depended on brain functions, which were themselves fully determined by laws of nature. Furthermore, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) influentially analyzed the “anthropological essence” of religion, viz., God as a reflection of the

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human essence. Both lines of thought were intertwined with political criticism and sparked heated controversy. From the 1860s onwards, moreover, the results of physiology and experimental psychology led various epistemologists and logicians Christoph von Sigwart (1830–1904) and Ernst Mach (1838–1916) to think of the norms of reasoning as (akin to) psychological laws.

Philosophers such as Otto Liebmann (1840–1912) and Friedrich Albert Lange (1828–1875) attempted to counter these trends with the slogan “back to Kant!” The neo-Kantian movement aimed to apply Kant's "scientific philosophy" to the new historical circumstances. For Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894), "scientific philosophy" meant that philosophical investigation needed to incorporate the results of sense-physiological experiment. Lange, furthermore, interpreted the results of physiology and experimental psychology as confirming fundamental features of Kant's transcendental psychology, including the very distinction—between phenomena and noumena—which precludes the doctrine of materialism (at least) as an ontology. Hermann Lotze (1817–1881) and Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), by contrast, defended anti-psychologistic interpretations of Kant's critical philosophy, and they sharply distinguished between (physiological or psychological) genesis and (philosophical) validity. Lotze and Cohen argued that the sciences were themselves epistemologically naïve, as scientists did not pay due respect to the manner in which experience, hence also scientific experiment, was preconditioned (and necessarily limited) by the pure forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding. In general, the neo-Kantians claimed that since the new sciences ignored the distinction between objects of experience and things-in-themselves, they erroneously presented their speculations concerning soul, God and free will as having the status of established scientific theories.

While the natural scientists were not overly impressed with this epistemological rejoinder from the philosophy faculty, philosophy was also under attack from other sides. Influential groups were the recently institutionalized professions of the historians, the biologists and the social scientists (see the science section of this volume). But also from the margins of philosophy itself, loud voices were being raised. The late fame of the works of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) presented the neo-Kantians with a set of challenges: Schopenhauer's ethical conception of philosophy as chiefly dealing with the “problem of existence” gave the discipline a wider relevance which (at least for the general public) the neo-Kantians' epistemological orientation could not provide. And Schopenhauer's position that in interpreting the meaning of existence,

philosophy must affirm that it proceeds metaphysically, became the main alternative to the neo-Kantian understanding of philosophy. Furthermore, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) confronted philosophy with a radical critique that challenged its traditional self-understanding of being committed to an impartial pursuit of truth. Nietzsche aimed to identify the philosophers' truths as nothing more than their favorite prejudices. His method of "genealogy" attempted to uncover the psychological and historical origins of philosophical convictions. Nietzsche dramatically raised many of the problems that would haunt the intellectual climate of the following decades, such as contingency, ideology, and power, as well as their philosophical correlates, historicism, nihilism, and relativism.

As the first chapter in this section stresses, Nietzsche's critical reorientation of philosophy remains a challenge especially in interpreting his own oeuvre as well as the developments he went through. For instance, it is still heavily debated whether Nietzsche's idea of "perspectivism" has relativistic implications. According to Brian Leiter's assessment of Nietzsche's perspectivism, however, the necessarily perspectival character of human knowledge is nothing like the Protagorean "man is the measure" doctrine that it is sometimes associated with. For one, Nietzsche thought that evolutionary pressures shape human beings' dispositions towards certain kinds of beliefs, so that their knowledge is relative only to the perspective of the human species. For another, in denying Kant's thing-in-itself any relevance to human cognition and asserting that all knowing depends on affects, Nietzsche's perspectivism states that the more affects we engage, the more we know. In Nietzsche's own inquiries into human beings and their motivations, this aspect of his perspectivism appears crucial: affectively engaging with different (types of) human beings helps to learn why they value and act as they in fact do.

The epistemological, existential, and political challenges posed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche did not solely affect the new radical movements in philosophy and art which arose around 1900, such as symbolism, fauvism, expressionism and "*Lebensphilosophie*." Also the two schools of neo-Kantianism, and later the movement of phenomenology, became aware that the "problem of relativism" was not so easily resolved. The Marburg school's main concern was with spelling out the conditions of experience (which Cohen and others found in the concepts and methods of the mathematical sciences, and Ernst Cassirer [1874–1945] in the symbolic forms which condition the development of knowledge and culture). The Baden school, with main representatives e.g. Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915) and Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936), by

contrast, reformulated the critical project as a "philosophy of values." The philosophy of values would not only determine the basis of normative judgment, but also allow to demarcate an independent realm for the historical and cultural sciences. Windelband, for instance, discussed relativism as a philosophical problem already in 1880. He was one of the first to conceive of "psychologism" and "historicism" as inevitably leading to relativism, because of their crossing the boundary between genesis and validity. Windelband argued that all attempts by psychologists and historicists to empirically vindicate the norms for epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics were doomed to fail, as they attempted to derive normativity from contingent phenomena.

The approach of Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) to the problem of reconciling neo-Kantian philosophy with the results of the historicist tradition is discussed by Samantha Matherne in the second chapter. Matherne argues that although Cassirer rejects "complete relativism" he nevertheless endorses another form of relativism that is grounded on Kantian principles, which Matherne labels "critical relativism." According to Cassirer, the complete relativist defines objectivity as correspondence to something absolute, while simultaneously denying that absolutely true judgments are possible. As a consequence, no objectively true judgments are possible and truth is relativized to individual subjects. Critical relativism, on the other hand, defines objectivity in terms of conforming to the functions (concepts, laws, principles) of experience. Thus, while also denying that judgments could be absolutely true, the critical relativist still thinks that they can be measured according to the ideal limit of the "whole" of cognition. Central to Cassirer's argument in favor of critical relativism, then, is the claim that our judgments in morality are like those in natural science: their objectivity may be measured according to the extent in which they govern the wholes of experience and of willing respectively. In this way, the idea of progressing science and morality plays a crucial role in Cassirer's understanding of the relativity of both.

In the context of grounding sociology as a science and, specifically, establishing the "sociology of knowledge," historicism and relativism presented not merely profound challenges, but also great opportunities. As Martin Kusch highlights in the third chapter, Georg Simmel (1858–1918) and Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) both adopted relativism at least as a method for uncovering the social, material, and historical conditions of (philosophical) knowledge. Strikingly, in their sociological-historical case studies, they traced the emergence of "relativism" and "historicism" as products e.g. of modern monetary reality (Simmel) and of the

tradition of political conservatism (Mannheim). They thus turned the historical reflexivity, mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, from a threat to epistemology into a methodological virtue of their sociological research programs. In addition, Kusch analyzes how Simmel and Mannheim dealt with the philosophical implications of their sociology. Simmel declared himself a relativist and aimed to relativize even the opposition between relativism and absolutism. However, assessing whether Simmel actually was a relativist, either by the standards of the time or by our standards today, remains a challenge. Mannheim, by contrast, thought the sociology of knowledge had to avoid relativism at all costs—but Kusch concludes that his attempts to do so failed.

The neo-Kantian and phenomenologist relativism-charge did not merely affect those who aimed to follow the sciences. The charge also returned to haunt those who attempted to radically revise the rules of philosophy and metaphysics. Thus, Edmund Husserl (1859–1939) also called out Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) for solely focusing on the “essence of human being’s concrete worldly Dasein,” and for thus committing to “anthropologism,” psychologism, and indeed, (species-)relativism. In Sacha Golob’s chapter on the question whether Heidegger was in fact a relativist, Golob assesses Husserl’s charge by countering a sophisticated interpretation of Heidegger as a relativist. According to this relativistic reading, Heidegger is a “conceptual scheme” relativist who historicizes the a priori and claims that multiple incommensurable frameworks exist for understanding being. By contrast, Golob argues that Heidegger offers a hermeneutic analysis of the underlying assumptions of the opposition between relativism and absolutism. Importantly, Golob interprets Heidegger as a realist, for whom the essential task of phenomenology and hermeneutics consists in adjusting and recalibrating our standpoint, so that we “arrive at the right perspective.”