

The three short circuits of philosophical epistemology

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Abstract:

Philosophical epistemology bases its understanding of cognition on the *heuristic short-circuit* of the content with the object of cognition. This short-circuit corresponds to the idea of truth in the sense of some kind of correspondence between the content and the object of knowledge. The problem that arises from this is the question of the verifiability of this correspondence, which would presuppose a transcendent standpoint that, for lack of existence, becomes a mere vanishing point of reflection. The standpoint of reflection corresponds to the adoption of a transcendent standpoint that is nevertheless anchored in the cognizing subject. The question of correspondence thus becomes a question of certainty. This leads to a second, this time *theoretical short-circuit*, namely the conflation of the actual question of a theory of the phenomenon of cognition, the question of the genesis (or generation) of the content of cognition, with the question of the certainty of this content. This conflation ultimately leads to the question of which (by definition subjective) elements of the cognitive process can guarantee certainty, and thus to a further, third, namely *methodological short-circuit* through the definition of the (in truth holistic) cognitive situation in terms of a subject-object opposition and the associated exclusion of the knowledge of the empirical natural sciences from cognitive reflection. The aim of this short paper (which is the introduction to a recent publication entitled 'Rehabilitation of Pure Reason') is to find an adequate understanding of the phenomenon of cognition by reversing these short-circuits in reverse order, i.e. by starting from the affirmative acknowledgement of the holism of the real cognitive situation, which excludes subjective certainty as a reasonable goal of cognition from the outset.

The question of the certainty of our knowledge is a premature question from a scientific point of view, i.e. according to the current state of our knowledge. This is because it presupposes a knowledge of the phenomenon of cognition, i.e. of what cognition and knowledge *are* from a scientific point of view, which we obviously do not yet have. It is also a fact, however, that any kind of cognitive activity and knowledge per se always already (necessarily and inherently) involves an idea of cognition and knowledge, at least in the form of the formal distinction between content and object of cognition as a minimum condition; whereby the (logical) nature of the relationship between content and object is initially open, and itself forms a possible object of cognition, namely the object of *epistemology*. Finally, it is also a fact that there is not one philosophical theory of cognition as a phenomenon, but various competing theories. Regardless of this, philosophical epistemology traditionally claims primacy over empirical, scientific knowledge, in the sense of its claim to 'critical legitimation' according to the standard of certainty.

This raises the question of exactly what the claim of philosophical epistemology to its primacy over the natural sciences (which is reflected in the meta-status of the philosophy of science) is based on. The justification of this claim can obviously not be given in the form of a direct reference to the (respective) theory, which in turn is under pressure to legitimize itself (with regard to its own appropriateness). Rather, it is based on the fact that philosophical epistemology declares the topic of legitimation as such to be its core topic, the core point of its reflection, and – this is the decisive point – by way of postulating certainty as the heuristic norm of knowledge in general.

In this way, the theoretical core question of epistemology, namely that concerning the nature of the relationship between the content and the object of cognition, is heuristically subordinated to the meta-viewpoint of the question of certainty, as the seemingly critical pivotal point of epistemological reflection. This allows epistemology to remain continuously in the mode of (seemingly unconditional, radical) reflection. However, it thereby disregards the fact that, as comprehensively critical as the standard of certainty seems *prima vista*, it nevertheless (uncritically) carries its own assumptions with it, which are not covered by it. Above all, the metaphysical assumption of the (autonomous) determinateness of things in themselves, which is one of the unquestioned basic assumptions of traditional epistemology, without which the question of certainty (and thus the critical standpoint of epistemology) would make no sense from the outset.

In this regard, we will speak of *the heuristic short-circuiting of the content with the object of*

cognition (the deeply rooted thinking of the content of cognition from the side of the object), which forms the core of the common idea of cognition and knowledge. Thus writes already Descartes in the 'Principles': „... yet substance cannot be first discovered merely from its being a thing which exists independently ... We easily, however, discover substance itself from any attribute of it, ... for, from perceiving that some attribute is present, we infer that some existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed is also of necessity present.“ [Descartes, 1965, § LII]. To this there corresponds a *material* definition of knowledge, as expressed in the question “What can we know?”¹, and also the general talk of 'cognitive capacity' or our 'limited cognitive capacity'.

This heuristic short-circuit as the core of the definition of cognition leads, as will be shown, as a logical consequence to a (theoretically fatal) disregard of the fundamental (and at the same time variable) role of heuristics for cognitive activity in general (and its quite variable rational standards). In contrast, it is precisely the conviction of the indispensability of the metaphysical assumption in question as a heuristic condition for a rational understanding of cognitive activity that seems to be a central motive for this short-circuit. After all, epistemology cannot rely on certainty with regard to this assumption, which is decisive for its conception of cognition (and its own heuristics); on the contrary, one of the essential consequences resulting from this conception is, as is well known, that the relevant basic ontological categories (substance and causality) cannot themselves be justified epistemologically (or, in the Kantian sense, only to a limited extent, namely as transcendental conditions of the possibility of experience).

The primary, heuristic short-circuit logically leads to a *secondary, theoretical short-circuit*, namely the short-circuiting of the theoretically primary question of the genesis of the content of cognition with the question of the certainty of the content in question, i.e. the interpretation and analysis of the process of cognition in the (heuristically dominant) horizon of the question of the legitimation (certainty) of the content of cognition. Traditional epistemology thus to a certain extent sets the second step (the question of legitimation) before the first (the unbiased analysis of the generation of the contents of cognition with regard to the concrete cognitive activity).

The fact that certainty as the ultimate norm of the legitimation of cognitive content is a subjective category finally leads to a *third*, this time *methodological short-circuit*, namely the consequent negation of the holism of the real cognitive situation in the form of the sharpened interpretation of the cognitive relationship in the sense of a subject-object-opposition, which is also expressed in the common topos of the cognition of the 'outside world'. With regard to the epistemological claim of the critical legitimation of the empirical natural sciences, this methodological short-circuit implies the systematic exclusion of empirical (scientific) knowledge from the reflection on cognition.

The outlined setting of traditional epistemology and its own heuristic focus on the goal of certainty ultimately proves to be a formidable dead end. This is because the standard of certainty refers to the content of knowledge, but the question of certainty must thereby presuppose the entire setting of epistemology, which is why epistemological reflection is ultimately exhausted in the debate. If one takes into account that the theory of cognition (no matter which one) is itself a product of cognitive activity, i.e. a content of cognition, then basically every reference point for reflection on certainty is lost.

In order to arrive at an appropriate analytical understanding of the phenomenon of cognition (as a precondition for everything else), on the other hand, it is obvious to take the exact opposite path, i.e. to reverse the three short circuits mentioned, the heuristic, the theoretical and the methodological, in reverse order: Starting from the affirmative acknowledgement of the holism of the real cognitive situation to the logical analysis of real cognitive activity on this basis, and finally to the analysis of the fundamental role of heuristics for cognitive activity, with its essential manifestations: the purely

1 If one formulates the question “What can we know?” in the more concrete form of the question “What can we know about the objects?”, one avoids the implicit heuristic equation of knowledge with certainty, because the objects of knowledge (especially in the context of epistemology) also include the cognizing subject itself.

pragmatic, the qualitatively descriptive (oriented towards the objects), and the mathematically deconstructive heuristic.

This approach corresponds in sum to a logical de- and reconstruction of traditional epistemology and at the same time forces us to revise its claim to primacy over empirical natural science (which is linked to the idea of the ineluctability of the subject).² The task and goal of philosophy of science cannot be to prescribe methodological norms for empirical science (on the basis of a particular epistemology); rather, philosophy of science must for its part be measured against the real, heuristically guided cognitive activity of scientists and consequently also be measured against the appropriate understanding of this cognitive activity. Its primary goal can only be the *rational comprehensibility* of this activity on the basis (and at the same time as a test of its own) of the epistemology in question. At the same time, it also opens up the perspective of a rationally comprehensible connection of epistemology to the results of physics as a basic science, within the framework provided by the reciprocal deconstructive approach; this implies the goal of *rational comprehensibility* according to the heuristic yardstick of *deconstruction*, which consists solely in the appropriateness of the *reconstruction* of the phenomena in question that is based on it.

This heuristic standard of legitimation is also the only one that can be meaningfully applied to epistemology itself. If one assumes that the object of cognitive theory is the phenomenon of cognition, the real cognitive activity – not a prefabricated idea of this phenomenon – and if one also takes into account that every theory of cognition (whether in the form of a rudimentary, naive idea or an elaborated theory) is itself a product of cognitive activity, then it follows that its only yardstick of its own must consist in the appropriateness of the theory to its object, the real cognitive activity. The difference between content and object of knowledge applies no less to epistemology than to any other content of knowledge. This necessarily leads to the conclusion that *not certainty, but only rational, analytical clarity* regarding the phenomenon of cognition, i.e. regarding real cognitive activity in all its forms and facets, can be the goal and originary standard of epistemology. Only on this basis can the topic of certainty be addressed in a reasonable framework (without prejudicial assumptions).³ The goal of content-related certainty as an unreal vanishing point of cognitive reflection (because cognitive theory itself is a product of cognitive activity) is thus necessarily replaced by an inherent commitment to the criterion of the appropriateness of the theoretical reconstruction of real cognitive activity and its (depending on the heuristic) rationale.

The central thesis of this paper will be that *the affirmative acknowledgement of the holism of the real cognitive situation* (i.e. the consideration of the cognizer as an element of the class of objects of cognition) is the necessary condition for an adequate analysis, or an adequate logical understanding of real cognitive activity. This will logically build on the thesis that *differentiation* is the fundamental, transcendental-logical condition of cognition (in a given holistic framework). As such a condition, it forms the key to a logical deconstruction of the traditional conception of cognition in one with a logical reconstruction of the real cognitive activity; and this on the basis of the guideline of the question of the source of the content of cognition, which therefore carries with it its own standard, namely the adequacy of the epistemo-logical reconstruction of the genesis (resp. generation) of this content. In doing so (without heuristic prejudice), it follows on from the purely *formal* distinction between the content and the object of cognition, or knowledge, as the logical core and as a minimum condition for its definition (in contrast to the common *material* definition of knowledge).⁴

The affirmative acknowledgement of the holism of the real cognitive situation as the key to solving

2 To put it in classical terms: it is a matter of finally taking the so-called 'finiteness of our cognitive faculty' seriously as the principle of cognitive activity, without assuming the vanishing point of a divine standpoint of cognition.

3 An appropriate starting point for reflection on the question of certainty is the question of what the recognizing subject knows with certainty about itself.

4 Incidentally, skepticism does not take hold on this level; rather, it makes clear the own, unquestioned metaphysical presuppositions of the logic of skepticism.

the task of the logical reconstruction of real cognitive activity implies, in ontological terms, that the cognitive *relationship* cannot be analyzed in any other way than as a *unilateral reference*. The representation of cognition as a *relationship* is justified, but only as a formal one, from the meta-standpoint of reflection, not with regard to the concrete goal of analyzing and logically reconstructing cognitive activity.

The core of the logical de- and reconstruction of cognitive activity will be the thesis that it is not the immediate sensory impressions per se, but their *differentiation* that forms the source of the content of cognition. The differentiation of sensory impressions as a *logical* (or transcendental-logical) condition of the possibility of cognition (as well as of concrete reference) will ultimately be linked in logical consequence to two further ('transcendental') conditions of cognition, namely *unilateral reference* (within the framework of the holism of the situation) as an *onto-logical* condition of the possibility of differentiation, and criteria of differentiation (*the heuristic*) as a *trans-logical condition*.⁵

The touchstone of these results of the purely logical analysis is, as already emphasized, the task of rationally reconstructing the real cognitive activity in concreto. Particular importance will be attached to the careful fulfillment of this task with regard to the deconstructive concept of knowledge in physics as a basic science, which differs significantly from the descriptive concept of knowledge with regard to all three conditions mentioned.

And especially with regard to the *ontological conclusions* that consequently result from this. For the pure logic of deconstruction releases physical theories from the ontological corset of description, the attribution of properties, and instead places the fundamental physical concepts themselves in the focus of ontological reflection. This reflection will, by means of a pure reasoning, lead to the ontological *thesis of the primacy of the constellation over the elementary particles* (in terms of their behavior) and, as a further consequence, to the ontological thesis of the principle of autarky as the principle of individuation, of the physical constitution of concrete, structural units.

In combination with the analytical understanding of the total immanence of the physical plane (as a plane without unilateral reference and differentiation, which corresponds to the thesis of the primacy of the constellation) the ontological principle of autarky (by way of the trans-logical distinction between contingent and precarious autarky) will prove to be the key to an adequate understanding of the phenomena of cognition and consciousness on a scientific basis (as well as a point of reference for a natural explanation, by focusing on the question of the natural genesis of differentiation, i.e. of unilateral reference and heuristic, as the elementary principle of cognitive activity).

In this way, the logical analysis or de- and reconstruction of the phenomenon of cognition also forms the analytical basis and the starting point for a de- and reconstruction of the phenomena of cognition and consciousness on a scientific basis, in other words, the analytical basis for an appropriate (non-reductionist) philosophy and phenomenology of mind, in accordance with the rational claim and standard of de- and reconstruction, namely rationally comprehensible clarity with regard to real cognitive activity in all its manifestations, including the logic of the traditional epistemology.

The title of the publication mentioned in the abstract, to which this work forms the introduction, is 'Rehabilitation of Pure Reason', referring to the idea of reason as the classical capacity to transcend the cognition of the individual (of individual objects) towards the surrounding totality. This refers to an agenda that is already inescapably grounded in the elementary cognitive activity of

5 Logically, this will also result in a different understanding of language, namely as a vehicle of common, mediated reference to objects, which in itself, qua its binding rules of use, exercises a standardizing function. It specifies its own conditions of truth within the framework of communication. This understanding of language in turn corresponds to the understanding of cognition as exploration, not (or only secondarily) as mental representation.

differentiation as such, and finds its (and indeed in detail) very specific methodological expression in the deconstructive heuristics of physics.

At the same time, in deliberate allusion to Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason', it is to be understood as a plea against the standard of certainty as an anchor point of cognitive reflection – which is in no way appropriate to the fundamental holism of the cognitive situation – and which stands in the way of an appropriate analytical understanding of real cognitive activity. It is not the 'objective' mental representation, but rather the successive exploration of the totality (of the 'world', including the cognizer himself) from an immanent point of view – with whatever heuristic objective – that is the logical core of cognitive activity (in an evolutionary and historical context).

References:

Descartes, René: *The Principles of Philosophy*. Transl. by John Veitch. In: *A Discourse on Method; Meditations and Principles*. London: Dent; New York, NY: Dutton 1965. (Everyman's Library; 570)