

Critical Remarks on Neo-Kantian Interpretations of Carnap and Kuhn

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Overview

Part I: Michael Friedman's *Dynamics of Reason*
(2001)

Part II: „German empiricism“: 19th century
epistemology reconsidered

Part I: Michael Friedman's
Dynamics of Reason (2001)

1. An attempt to develop a modified version of a Kantian scientific epistemology

Friedman's book is an attempt „to develop a modified version of a Kantian scientific epistemology capable of doing justice to the revolutionary changes within the sciences that have led to the most important philosophical challenges to the original Kantian conception”, namely, “Quinean holism” and “post-Kuhnian conceptual relativism” (e.g., *Sociology of Scientific Knowledge*). (p.117)

2. Point of departure: the relativized a priori in Carnap and Kuhn

- Actually, both Carnap and Kuhn develop an account of the sciences which is based on a certain notion of „relativized a priori“.
- That is, both Carnap and Kuhn distinguish (in some sense) between „a priori constitutive principles and properly empirical laws“. (p. 43f)
- **Carnap:** a priori constitutive principles = external questions, L-rules; empirical laws = internal questions, P-rules.
- **Kuhn:** a priori constitutive principles = paradigms / revolutionary science; empirical laws = normal science.

3. There is a rationality gap in the conceptions of Carnap and Kuhn

- Both Carnap and Kuhn fail to provide any satisfying explanation for the rational dynamic of the sciences.
- Both Carnap and Kuhn fail to provide any sufficient criteria to explain how and why different standards of scientific rationality (paradigms, frameworks) may change.

„[The] most fundamental problem raised by the Kuhnian account of scientific revolutions (and, in particular, by the idea of incommensurability) is to explain how it can be (communicatively) rational to move to a new constitutive framework, based on a radically new set of coordinating principles, despite the fact that this new framework, from the point of the old constitutive framework, is not even (empirically) possible. **What rational motivation can there be – and how can it even be rationally intelligible – to make such a radical shift?** Once *this* shift has been successfully negotiated, the rest of the story is relatively straightforward.“ (p. 99)

4. The failure of naturalism and sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK)

- Neither Quine's holistic naturalism nor SSK allow us to close the aforementioned rationality gap.
- Essentially, both Quine and SSK lead to an *external* account of rationality, which is quite similar to Hume's classical empiricist conception of a „ready made world“.
- The failure of both Quine and SSK is essentially the same failure that Kant had once uncovered in Hume's epistemology.

5. The failure of Kantian epistemology

- On the other hand, Kant's proposal that there may be a rock-solid and eternal core of fundamental constitutive principles that may be fixed once and for all clearly also had failed.
- Thus, we may have to accept the relativity of constitutive principles, pretty much along the lines that were drawn out by Carnap (linguistic frameworks) and Kuhn (paradigms).

6. Friedman's epistemological puzzle

- Thus, we arrive at a puzzling situation for epistemology:
- On the one hand, it seems quite clear that empiricist conceptions (as instantiated by Quine and SSK) who try to sift out the constitutive principles of the sciences by means of sheer empirical investigations are hopeless (because constitutive principles are the pre-requirement of empirical investigations).
- On the other hand, there seems to be no way to identify constitutive principles, once and for all, at an a priori level (as desired by Kant).
- So, how can we choose our constitutive principles?

7. A role for neo-Kantian epistemology

- In order to avoid the failure of Quine and SSK a solution to Friedman's puzzle (according to Friedman) has to be **strictly a priori**.
- In order to avoid the failure of Kant a solution to Friedman's puzzle (according to Friedman) has to accept **the relativity of constitutive principles**.
- The result is a variety of neo-Kantian epistemology, in the tradition of the Marburg school, in general, and Ernst Cassirer, in particular (with additional links to Peircian pragmatism):

„What I am now suggesting is that we should adapt Kant’s conception of the regulative use of reason to what he called the constitutive domain as well – so as to attain, in particular, an inter-paradigm, trans-historical universality within *this* domain.“ (p.64)

This leads to an „internal realism“ of a sort:
„We can thus view our present scientific community, which has achieved temporary consensus based on communicative rationality erected on its present constitutive principles, as an approximation to a final, ideal community of inquiry [...].“ (ibid.)

8. A three-level approach

- But how can we actually **find** the respective constitutive principles?
- Friedman's proposal is the following:
- „I suggest, we need to replace Kuhn's twofold distinction between normal and revolutionary science with a threefold distinction between normal science, revolutionary science, and the philosophical articulation of what we might call meta-paradigms or meta-frameworks for revolutionary science capable of motivating and sustaining the transition to a new scientific paradigm.” (p.44)

9. Doubts

- Friedman's own solution to his epistemological puzzle reduces the whole development of the sciences to philosophical meta-frameworks, who, according to Friedman, do not deserve any further explanations (we may just "let a thousand flowers bloom", p.24).
- This implies that "pure intuition" ultimately becomes the only explanation for the progress of the sciences.
- Moreover, it seems that „discursive logics“ of that kind Friedman uses here (with references to Cassirer and Peirce) were rejected for good reasons at the beginning of the 20th century.
- But where is an alternative? Where is a solution to Friedman's puzzle that does not have to make use of the doubtful method of "pure" or "discursive logic"?

Part II: „German empiricism“

19th century epistemology reconsidered

1. Historical plea: an incomplete picture of 19th century epistemology

- Like other recent accounts of 19th century epistemology Friedman's exposure overlooks the developments that we find **between** the break-down of German idealism and the rise of neo-Kantian epistemology.
- „[P]ost-Kantian German idealism [...] was then countered, in turn, by a reaction in favor of a new type of ‚scientific philosophy‘ aiming to return to what it took to be most important in Kant. And scientific philosophy itself fragmented once again, into neo-Kantianism, on the one side, and what then became logical positivism, on the other.“ (p.21)

2. The missing link?

- Actually, the neo-Kantian movement hardly starts to take profile until 1870 or so. Langes „History of Materialism“, for example, appeared in 1866 (and Hegel died in 1831).
- Moreover, the main motivation of neo-Kantianism, was **not** an overcoming of German idealism, but rather an overcoming of „materialism“ and some „relativist“ varieties of post-idealist epistemology.
- On the other hand, **scientific philosophy**, initially, developed in the context of the just-mentioned projects of post-idealist philosophy and was just further developed by the neo-Kantians and related figures such as Helmholtz and Poincaré.
- Thus, it seems worth having a look at these early varieties of scientific philosophy that appear to be **both** anti-Kantian **and** anti-empiricist (for lack of a better terminology I use the term **German empiricism**)

3. Names (and an example)

- There are a number of philosophers who (at least at a first glance) seem to provide solutions to exactly that kind of epistemological puzzle we discussed in the first part but without collapsing into varieties of empiricism or Kantianism.
- **Names:** Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, Eduard Beneke, Friedrich Ueberweg, Wilhelm Dilthey, Moritz Lazarus, etc.
- **My Example:** Wilhelm Dilthey

Cf. Christian Damböck, “Wilhelm Diltheys empirische Philosophie und der rezente Methodenstreit in der analytischen Philosophie“, *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 85, 2012.

4. Dilthey's starting point

Dilthey's starting point was an obvious variety of Friedman's epistemological puzzle (i.e., the failure of **both** empiricism **and** Kantianism):

“[P]revious epistemology – Kant's as well as that of the empiricist – has explained experience and cognitions in terms of facts that are merely representational [dem bloßen Vorstellen angehörig]. No real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject constructed by Locke, Hume, and Kant, but rather the diluted extract of reason as a mere activity of thought.” Dilthey, GS I, XVIII (SW I, 50)

5. A different variety of relativized a priori

- Dilthey's epistemology, consequently, also has to be based on a variety of a „relativized a priori“.
- For Dilthey, there are constitutive principles, but these constitutive principles are by no means fixed and given once and for all.
- Unlike in the case of (all varieties of) neo-Kantianism, however, for Dilthey, the relative a priori constitutive principles are **not** accessible via (a relativized version of) pure or discursive logic.

„Kant's a priori is fixed and dead; but the real conditions of consciousness and its presuppositions, as I grasp them, constitute a living historical process, a development; they have a history, and the course of this history involves their adaptation to the ever more exact, inductively known manifold of sense-content.“

Dilthey, GS XIX, p. 44 (SW, vol. I, p. 500f)

6. Relative independence from the natural sciences

- In order to sift out these “real conditions of consciousness” we need a “descriptive psychology” which is **embedded** in the context of the natural sciences.
- However, “descriptive psychology” uses its own terminology and therefore also is somewhat **relatively independent** from the natural sciences.
- Thus, by contrast to the neo-Kantian conception, the humanities or “Geisteswissenschaften” (as based on “descriptive psychology”) are by no means something totally independent from the natural sciences.

„If one were to imagine purely spiritual beings [...] their coming-to-be, preservation, and development [...] would be based on their relation to a world of spirit. [...] The system of such individuals would be known by pure sciences of spirit. **In reality, however, an individual comes into being, survives, and develops on the basis of the functions of an animal organism and its connections to his natural environment.** [...] Thus the mental life of a man is part of the psychological life-unit which is the form in which human existence and human life are manifested. Only by means of abstraction is mental life separable from that psychophysical life-unit. The system of these life-units is the reality which constitutes the subject matter of the socio-historical sciences.” Dilthey GS I, 14f (SW I, 66f)

7. The renaissance of pure logic in Husserl and the neo-Kantians

- It is extremely important to understand that both Husserl and the main varieties of neo-Kantianism must be seen as reactions to the aforementioned project.
- Essentially, both Husserl and the neo-Kantians propose **to replace** the empirical and just relatively independent method of „descriptive psychology“ by an aprioristic method that appears to be **totally independent from the natural sciences**.
- In the case of Husserl, the „new“ method is called **phenomenology**.
- In the case of the neo-Kantians, the „new“ method is a variety of (relativized) **discursive logic** (in the tradition of Kant and Hegel).

8. There is no knock-down argument against the empirical approaches

- One hardly may find any knock-down argument against the more empirical (and just relatively independent) methods of the earlier projects of a post-idealist epistemology.
- Actually, there are good arguments that the „new“ projects of phenomenology and neo-Kantianism were rather regressive conceptions, motivated by political factors rather than by „pure reason“.
- Cf. the respective works by Klaus Christian Köhnke (1986) and Martin Kusch (1995).

9. SSK, „empirical, not empiricist“!

- Thus, it seems to be worthwhile to consider the post-idealist and pre-neo-Kantian projects of an empirification of the transcendental as a possible background for the development of better solutions to Friedman's epistemological puzzle.
- Roughly, the idea may be to adopt Dilthey's slogan „empirical, not empiricist“ (“Empirie, nicht Empirismus”) in the context of SSK, in order to develop a variety of „non-materialist naturalism“, similar to these approaches that we can find in 19th century epistemology (mainly in Germany).
- However, this is work that has to be done in the future!