TRUTH, TIME, AND THE EXTENDED UMWELT PRINCIPLE: CONCEPTUAL LIMITS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS

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Summary

This paper seeks to elucidate methodological constraints that apply to a natural philosophy of time as envisioned by J. T. Fraser from the point of view of a critical (Neo-Kantian) theory of knowledge. The seminal concept considered is the “extended Umwelt principle,” which in Fraser’s theory serves to establish a strong link between ontology and epistemology. It is argued here that this link is problematic. Furthermore, the extended Umwelt principle does not account for the specific characteristics of the human notion of the “world.” The human “world” is not just a larger Umwelt, extended by technical instruments, but, to the contrary, a critical tool to reflect on the confinements of any Umwelt. The final section sketches out some revisions to and guiding principles for the further development of the natural philosophy of time on the grounds of the analysis given.

1. Introduction

J. T. Fraser’s hierarchical theory of time is arguably the most comprehensive theory on this subject existing to date. As such, it deserves full attention from all disciplines engaging in the exploration of time. This paper approaches the hierarchical theory of time from a philosophical point of view. More precisely, it is based on a critical reading of Fraser’s work through Neo-Kantian eyes. Keeping the core insight of Neo-Kantianism—that is, the intimate relation that exists between the concepts of truth, method, and reality in mind—it reflects upon the methodological constraints that apply to a natural philosophy of time. At the same time, it attempts to resolve some tensions between this theory’s content and its epistemological and ontological foundations as stated by Fraser himself.

In this introductory section, I will briefly describe the essential characteristics of the Neo-Kantian point of view. The main section of this paper then consists firstly of a summary of Fraser’s express statements on knowledge, truth, and reality, and the fundamental epistemological
concept behind the hierarchical theory of time, the extended (or generalized) umwelt principle. Secondly, I will enumerate the main points of contention between Fraser’s and the Neo-Kantian point of view, but also the logical tensions inherent in Fraser’s position. This is followed by a critical review of Fraser’s “working concept” of truth and of the extended umwelt principle. In the last part of the main section, I propose some consequences for the hierarchical theory of time. Finally, I attempt to anticipate and answer to some questions and criticisms concerning the argument presented.

What is it like to be a Neo-Kantian? Like Kant, Neo-Kantians are mainly interested in the foundations of knowledge, ethics and aesthetics. More precisely: we are interested in the foundations of the validity of knowledge etc., its scope, its quality (valid extension and intension), and its relation to other claims to validity. Based on Kantian insights, we think the main task of philosophy is to give a critical assessment of such claims to validity, with the affirmative aim of elucidating their possibility (against skepticism) and the negative aim of curbing excessive aspirations.

Unlike speculative philosophers (metaphysical, existential, positivist or others) we do not think it is our task to produce positive knowledge about the world or human life. However, we see our objective in opening up or clearing possible paths of rational investigation and solving riddles stemming from wrong, confused or excessive application of otherwise valid forms of thought.

In this, we are empirical insofar as we relate to given “facts of culture” such as science (Natorp 1910; Cassirer 1956), art (Marx 1981), morality and law (Cohen 1907) instead of deducing them from first principles or producing them by transcendent insight or other forms of intuition. We are therefore essentially opponents of metaphysical idealists and speculative philosophy. But—we are not empiricists, because we do not believe that truth etc. is something received from experience. We would rather say it is found in experience—while going on to say that experience itself is something created with the help of organizing principles, which are not given by nature or some celestial spirit, but invented by the mind. (On this, see especially Cohen 1914, 31–38; Natorp 1910, 22–26.) Thus, we would insist with Kant that “The conditions of possibility of experience are the conditions of possibility of the objects of experience” (cf. Kant 1787, 197)—and that