BOLZANO AND KANT ON THE PLACE OF SUBJECTIVITY IN A WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE

Clinton TOLLEY
University of California, San Diego

Summary
Throughout his career, Bolzano presents his account of knowledge and science as an alternative to ‘the Critical philosophy’ of Kant and his followers. The aim of this essay is to evaluate the success of Bolzano’s own account—and especially, its heavy emphasis on the objectivity of cognitive content—in enabling him to escape what he takes to be the chief shortcomings of the ‘subjective idealist philosophy’. I argue that, because Bolzano’s own position can be seen to be beset by problems that are both recognizably similar to, and possibly even worse than, those that he takes to afflict Kant’s account of the elements of our knowledge, Bolzano’s attempt to fully overcome the alleged vices of Kant’s idealism by ‘extruding’ semantic content from the mind must be judged to be less than satisfactory.

§1. Introduction: the mind and the ‘elements’ of science

In the first Critique, Kant famously argues that the objects of which we can have genuine knowledge are objects that ‘conform’ to our capacities for knowledge (Bxvi). Kant thinks that, as a consequence, any account of science must be grounded on an analysis of the nature and limits of our cognitive capacities. Kant himself attempts just such a grounding of the sciences of mathematics and physics over the course of the first Critique, the Prolegomena, and the Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science. Because Kant thinks that all of our knowledge arises from two basic capacities (two ‘stems’, cf., B29)—on the one hand, our capacity for sensing (intuiting,
being given) objects, what Kant calls our ‘receptivity’ or ‘sensibility’, and on the other hand, our capacity for thinking, judging, and inferring about objects, what Kant calls our ‘understanding’ (B74)—these two capacities themselves must form the genuine ‘elements’ in any account of knowledge. The correspondingly elementary ‘doctrines’ for the account of science in general, therefore, will be the sciences of sensibility and understanding, or what Kant calls ‘aesthetic’ and ‘logic’, respectively (B76). Accordingly, it is this pair of sciences that comprises the ‘doctrine of the elements [Elementarlehre]’ in the analysis of our theoretical knowledge that Kant provides in the first *Critique* itself (B29).

As Bolzano makes clear in his 1837 masterwork, the *Wissenschaftslehre*,² Bolzano takes Kant’s fixation upon mental capacities and activity to have gotten philosophy off on the wrong track. By restricting its focus in this way, Bolzano thinks that Kant entirely neglects the primary locus of the *truth* we are seeking in science. This is because, like Frege after him, Bolzano thinks it is evident that what is true, the genuine bearer of truth, is not a mental act or capacity at all, but instead is the ‘matter [Stoff]’ that is contained in these acts (WL §291, II.108), what Bolzano calls ‘propositions [Sätze]’ (WL §24, I.108). Since knowledge (‘cognition [Erkenntnis]’) consists in the grasping of truths (WL §§36–37, I.163ff.), and since ‘science [Wissenschaft]’ more generally is a ‘collection [Inbegriff]’ of truths (WL §1, I.4), it is hopeless to think—as Kant seems to—that we could come to know what knowledge and science are without first looking to the nature of truth itself and the nature of bearers of the property of being true (propositions).

What the pursuit of such analysis will ultimately show, Bolzano thinks, is that the distinction between act and content must be drawn, not just for knowledge and science as a whole, but for each of its component parts as well. That is, even in the mere act of ‘representing [Vorstellen]’ objects, Bolzano thinks we find a separate content or ‘matter [Stoff]’ in addition to the act itself, and in addition to the object represented (WL §49, I.218). Similarly, we will see that all acts of ‘judgment [Urteil]’ are such as to ‘contain [enthalten]’ a ‘proposition [Satz]’, something likewise distinct from both the subjective act of judging and the object and property that the judging is about (WL §34, I.154; cf., WL §290, III.108). Even in acts of

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². I will cite the *Wissenschaftslehre* as ‘WL’, according to the volume number and pagination of the original edition (Bolzano 1837), inserting the section number for ease of reference. Translations throughout are my own, though I have consulted, and at times followed, the partial translation (and additional paraphrases) contained in (Bolzano 1972).