

Knowledge First — a German Folly?

KEVIN MULLIGAN

1. Introduction

Timothy Williamson's *Knowledge and its Limits* broke sharply with received analytic wisdom according to which knowledge—that is a species of belief. It is rather, he argued, a relation in which we stand to true propositions or facts¹.

The Oxonian dimension of the history of the knowledge first approach in epistemology, in particular in the writings of Cook Wilson and Prichard, has been magisterially expounded by Mathieu Marion². The Germanophone dimension of the history of this approach is less well-known. It comprises two parts. The first goes from Jakob Friedrich Fries in the first half of the nineteenth century to Leonard Nelson, an unusually lucid and argumentative neo-Kantian. The second begins with Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* in 1900-01 and is developed by several of Husserl's students and disciples, the early, realist phenomenologists - Reinach, Scheler, and von Hildebrand. There is a connexion between the two German strands in our story. Reinach and Nelson, as well as Husserl, were colleagues in Göttingen before the Great War.

¹ Williamson 2000. For the view that there are mental acts and states which are relations, in the proper (non-Brentanian) sense of the word, to objects and facts, in the proper (non-Fregean) sense of the word, cf. Smith 1984, Mulligan & Smith 1986.

² Marion 2000 ; cf. Marion 2002, 2003.

Ramsey described the Oxford view that, as Prichard put it, „Knowledge is *sui generis*, and, as such, cannot be explained“, as „the Oxford Folly“³. If it is a folly, it is also a German Folly. Indeed if some seeds of the view are to be found in Husserl, it is an Austro-German Folly. In §§2-5 I sketch, disentangle and evaluate the views of the early, realist phenomenologists about the priority of knowledge. In the final section (§6), I compare some aspects of Göttingen and Oxford views about the primacy of knowledge.

1.

2. Appending (*Erkennen*) & Knowledge

The language of epistemology sometimes reflects and is perhaps even a prisoner of the language in which it is written. An epistemic verb which will be important in what follows is „erkennen“, which has sometimes been translated as „cognize“, sometimes means „recognize“ and which I shall translate here as „apprehend“.

The expression „theory of knowledge“ translates into German as „Erkenntnislehre“ or „Erkenntnistheorie“ and into French as „théorie de la connaissance“ (and even as „gnoséologie“). Although „connaissance“ undoubtedly often refers to the knowledge-that which people possess or have, „connaître“ is a verb which takes a nominal complement and, in such cases, is translated into English by « know », « is acquainted with » or „ken“ with a nominal complement. „Erkenntnis“, too, often refers to the knowledge-that which people have or possess. But the verb „erkennen“ has often been used by epistemologists to refer not to the knowledge that *p* which someone has or possesses but to the episode of apprehending or coming to know that *p*, for example, to discovery. Another construction, employed for example by Husserl, is « x apprehends Hans as Hans ». This type of apprehension plays an important rôle in Husserl’s development of the view, to be found later in Russell and Evans, that referring with the help of proper names presupposes knowledge of what is referred to.

³ Prichard 1909 124 ; Ramsey 1991 81. Both remarks are quoted by Marion (2000 310), who plausibly takes Ramsey’s remark to be about the sort of view expressed by Prichard. But it is possible that by « the Oxford Folly » Ramsey intends to refer to what he calls « an Oxford error » : « They suppose knowledge can be guaranteed » (Ramsey 1991 82). Marion also quotes Cook Wilson on Nelson on knowledge. The Oxford philosopher’s very oxonian reaction to the possibility that he might have German predecessors betrays his apparent ignorance of the fact that Nelson’s view of knowledge was a development of the much earlier work by Fries.

A theory, analytic description or philosophy of knowledge which aims at completeness would doubtless do well to distinguish systematically between epistemic episodes and non-episodes (states, dispositions) and also between epistemic intentionality which is thatish and epistemic intentionality which is non-thatish. That is, between knowledge that p , coming to know or apprehending that p , knowing or being acquainted with x and coming to know or making the acquaintance of x .

Thus in 1933 the phenomenologist Spiegelberg distinguished two meanings of « Erkenntnis ». The term may signify, he says, a „true judgement, the truth of which is evident“ (wahres Urteil, dessen Wahrheit ersichtlich ist). It may also signify „the cognitive act in which an object or state of affairs itself is ‘grasped’ (der kognitive Akt, in dem ein Gegenstand oder ein Sachverhalt selbst “erfaßt” wird)”⁴. Current versions of the knowledge first approach typically concentrate on knowledge that p rather than on apprehending that p , the phenomenon which is central in the German versions of the knowledge first approach. This makes for an important difference between the two approaches. But it is interesting to note that early Oxford versions of the knowledge first approach do refer frequently to „apprehension“ and even to „acts of knowing“ (cf. §6).

Husserl often asserts that knowledge is justified true belief. But he does not understand this claim in the way many anglophone epistemologists understood it during the second half of the twentieth century⁵. His claim does indeed concern knowledge-that (*wissen, dass*). But in what he calls the strict sense of „knowledge“ the relevant type of justification or ground is not defeasible. One knows that p in the strict sense only if one has perceived that p and such perceiving is not itself any sort of belief or judging⁶. Husserl seems not to have been bothered by the consequence that, on his view of strict knowledge, even taking into account the variety of perception and intuition he allows for, there is not very much of it. He does also allow for a lax sense of „knowledge“ where defeasible but undefeated justification plays a role. Indeed Husserl and Meinong seem to have introduced the very idea of defeasible justification, inductive and non-inductive, into twentieth century epistemology⁷.

⁴ Spiegelberg 1933 111.

⁵ Cf. Mulligan 2006.

⁶ Nelson (1908 71) notes that because Husserl’s concept of justification (*Evidenz*) entails truth he does not belong to the school which takes *Evidenz* to be a criterion of truth, the school criticized by Nelson and to which Meinong belongs.

⁷ Meinong’s term is *Vermutungsevidenz*, the evidence for conjectures. On Meinong on defeasible justification, cf Teroni 2005. On the history of appeals to defeasible justification in recent

Husserl's view that there is a direct, non-doxastic non-judgmental perception or intuition that p seems to have been the starting point for work by his pupils which puts knowledge first in ways not dreamt of or not countenanced by Husserl.

3. Knowledge First according to the Early Phenomenologists.

One of the last formulations of the knowledge first approach by a phenomenologist is due to Friedrich Bassenge. There is, he thinks, an intimate relation between statements and knowledge. In the normal case, he says, statements express knowledge:

State of affairs, knowledge, statement — these are the three basic phenomena ... The normal route to a statement is: (1) a state of affairs obtains ; (2) the state of affairs becomes apprehended and as a result known (*gewusst*) ; (3) the known state of affairs is stated (i.e. in the typical case communicated to someone else). A materialist theory⁸ of knowledge and logic must, it seems to me, take this typical sequence as its starting point and not place the deficient modes in the foreground⁹.

It is not clear what „normal“ means here; it is presumably not a statistical notion ; we shall meet the notion again in §5. The expression „deficient modes“ is a piece of Heideggerian jargon which Bassenge, no Heideggerian, highjacks for his own purposes. (Being alone is a deficient mode of togetherness, says the author of *Sein und Zeit*, who identifies many more such modes). What are the deficient modes Bassenge has in mind ? They include error or merely apparent knowledge and, it seems, judgement and belief:

The theory of knowledge and logic of past centuries did not put in the foreground the concept of knowledge (*Wissen*) but rather

anglophone epistemology, cf Dutant 2010, ch.1.

⁸ A materialist phenomenologist ? Bassenge, an anti-fascist, spent the last part of his life in the DDR. Bassenge (1955) is part of an extensive discussion between DDR logicians and philosophers of logic in which Bassenge does his best to persuade his colleagues of the view defended by Reinach before the Great War to the effect that the logic of propositions is in the first place the logic of states of affairs and only secondarily the logic of propositions. There are even earlier formulations of such a view in Husserl and it is, of course, also reminiscent of some of Frege's views in 1879.

⁹ Bassenge 1955 486.

the concept of judgement. A judgement in this sense is a belief (*Meinen*, believing) whereby one abstracts from whether the belief has just been gained (knowledge, *Erkenntnis*) or is habitual (knowledge, *Wissen*), or remains unexpressed, or is being expressed (as so to speak the inner aspect of the statement) or, above all, from whether the state of affairs believed [or meant] obtains (true judgement) or not (false judgement).¹⁰

According to Williamson's *bon mot*, mere believing or opining is „botched knowing“. According to Bassenge and other phenomenologists, a great deal of epistemology has been based on the assumption that the central concept of epistemology is in fact that of a deficient mode of knowledge. This way of conceptualising epistemology, says Bassenge,

was necessary for a philosophy whose starting point was what is subjectively meant or believed and whose main problem was whether it is at all possible to transcend this subjective starting point in the direction of objectivity or not¹¹.

Dietrich von Hildebrand, another active enemy of Hitler and a militant Catholic, provides what is perhaps the fullest account of the variety of knowledge in the phenomenological tradition and also defends the knowledge first view. He makes all the distinctions introduced above in §2, between coming to know that *p*, knowledge that *p*, acquaintance and coming to be acquainted with objects. He also argues at some length that the two non-episodic phenomena, knowledge-that and acquaintance, may be either merely potential or « supra-actual » , that is, more than mere dispositions. None of these phenomena, he thinks, can be understood in terms of judgment, assertion, belief or conviction¹² :

Apprehending is one of those ultimate phenomena which cannot be reduced to anything else, which we therefore cannot „define“...
13

Conviction [is an] epiphenomenon and the fruit of apprehending¹⁴

¹⁰ Bassenge 1955 486.

¹¹ Bassenge 1955 486.

¹² Hildebrand 1950 was written in the 1930's but could not be published. Parts of it are translated in Hildebrand 1960.

¹³ Hildebrand 1950 5.

¹⁴ „Die Überzeugung als Epiphänomen und Frucht des Erkennens“ (Hildebrand 1976 24).

Knowing in the wider sense is presupposed by judgement and differs from it¹⁵.

Judging or asserting in the narrow sense forms in a certain way the classical end-point, which does not belong to apprehending itself but is rather founded on the latter as something quite new... I speak; knowledge about the obtaining of a state of affairs is presupposed¹⁶.

Von Hildebrand's account of apprehending that *p* contains the claim that such apprehension is meaning-free, concept-free, and free of predication:

In apprehending the medium of units of meaning is absent. If I perceive a red (*ein Rot*), the meaning unit "red" is not involved. If I apprehend that the sun is shining, this state of affairs stands immediately before me, without it being the case that I have to go through the proposition (*Satz*): the sun is shining, of which I can predicate truth and falsity¹⁷.

The view that there is visual perception of things, persons, events and monadic qualities which need involve no conceptualisation has been familiar in analytic philosophy ever since Fred Dretske's pioneering investigations of what he, like Husserl, calls "simple seeing". It has even at times been quite popular, and has sometimes been combined with the view that such seeing involves content, a way in which what is seen is seen, which is non-conceptual. But the further claim that not only simple seeing of things, organisms and qualities but also perceptual apprehension that *p* may be concept-free and so non-doxastic and non-judgmental, has, as far as I can see, never enjoyed the same degree of popularity.

This claim that perceptual apprehension that *p* is concept-free is in fact ambiguous and, on one reading, may be held to be less controversial than on the other reading. The ambiguity was first pointed out by Scheler. To say that perception that *p* or perceptual apprehension that *p* is concept-free could just amount to the claim that it involves no subsumption under concepts, no predication. But it could also be read as claiming that such apprehension involves no mastery of concepts, that, for example, a subject who does not possess the concept *F* can nevertheless perceive or apprehend that *a* is *F*. Scheler considers two views, each of which he rejects:

¹⁵ Hildebrand 1950 8

¹⁶ Hildebrand 1976 23.

¹⁷ Hildebrand 1950 8.

It is asserted, first: in the content of natural perception nothing like a "meaning" occurs. The only thing I can perceive is a determinate, optical or other sensory content, e.g., the side-view of a house, these forms, lines, colours, surfaces, various of which can succeed one another in such a way that connections of anticipation and of memories between these views come about because of experience and training...

Others say: no ! Perception contains more than this. It contains a *judgement*: one apprehends what is seen "as" a house, or "as" something which falls under the "general meaning" "house"...What an astonishing construction ! We continuously perceive a thousand things - but without a trace of such judging and asserting...

The first theory "sensualises"...the meaning or better the meaning content which lies in natural perception. The second theory "logi-cises" natural perception and imputes to it something which it certainly does not contain¹⁸.

The correct view, he seems to think, is that perceptual apprehension is shaped by the meanings the perceiver masters but does not necessarily involve any "judgement or subsumption of what is seen" under meanings¹⁹. From the fact that a perceiver does not actually subsume what is seen under concepts or meanings it does not follow that the perceiver does not master certain concepts. We very often perceive and perceptually apprehend that *p*, suggests Scheler, without any subsumption under concepts going on but we would not perceive or apprehend in the way we do if we did not master certain concepts. In such cases, he claims, our relation to meanings is like our relation to the rules we follow, for example the rules we follow in inferring, as opposed to the premises from which we infer.

Von Hildebrand's main reason for thinking that knowledge, of whatever variety, is not any sort of belief or conviction, is a claim made first of all by Reinach, perhaps the greatest of all the phenomenologists. Belief and conviction, like emotions, are, Reinach argues, *attitudes* (*Stellungnahmen*). These may vary in degrees and usually come in one of two polarly opposed kinds – belief and disbelief, positive and negative conviction, joy and sadness. Attitudes, on this view, are not always propositional : admiration, for example, is a non-thatish attitude. But knowledge is not any sort of attitude – it does

¹⁸ Scheler 1957 472-3.

¹⁹ Scheler 1955 360

not admit of degrees and has no polar opposite. Attitudes are reactions to what is known. Knowledge is no reaction. So knowledge wears the trousers. Beliefs and convictions are reactions to what we know. Von Hildebrand develops many of these claims in some detail in many different publications. His starting point is Reinach's 1911 account :

There is an opposition running through this...class [conviction, striving, expecting] between positivity and negativity. We not only strive positively after something but may also struggle against it. In both cases [*Streben* and *Widerstreben*] we have a striving, but the two are, so to speak, of opposite sign. Now we find exactly the same in the case of conviction. So far we have naturally concentrated upon positive conviction; there is however, standing in opposition to this, a negative conviction, having a fully equal status....Both positive and negative convictions ...are... attitudes. The moment of conviction is common to the two, just as the moment of striving is common to positive striving for and to striving against something. It is this moment which separates the two types of conviction from other intellectual attitudes, e.g. from conjecture or doubt²⁰.

Reinach thinks that a conviction just is a belief-that. This is, I think, a mistake ; a conviction is a belief which has a high degree of certainty²¹. But beliefs, like convictions, are attitudes. What is the relation between beliefs and convictions, on the one hand, and knowledge ? Reinach's unhusserlian answer is as follows :

Let us suppose that someone asserts that a flower is red, and that in order to convince ourselves of this we go to the place where the flower is to be found, and see that it is yellow. Thus we have approached the flower with the question whether it is truly red. Now with respect to this state of affairs there grows in us a negative conviction, a 'disbelief' that the flower is red. Both positive and negative convictions may relate to one and the same state of affairs;...²²

²⁰Reinach 1989 109.

²¹ Cf. Mulligan 2013.

²² Reinach 1989 109.

These beliefs or convictions are what he calls *Erkenntnisüberzeugungen*, convictions which are *based on* knowledge:

I apprehend the being red of the rose; in this apprehension the state of affairs is presented to me, and *on the basis of the apprehension there develops in me the conviction of, or belief in, that state of affairs*. Conviction is, in this case, founded in apprehension; the former is the position which I take up, my receipt, so to speak, for that which apprehension offers to me²³.

The difference between apprehending and conviction, he claims, lies not only in the fact that the former unlike the latter allows of no degrees but also in the fact that the former is punctual and the latter a state, the sort of thing which endures (however long it exists; endurance is the mode of being of states as of things). Reinach's claims about the apprehension of the being red of the rose, like von Hildebrand's formulations, are ambiguous between the two views distinguished by Scheler. On one view, apprehension is no type of belief or conviction, involves no subsumption under concepts and does not depend on the meanings the perceiver masters. On the other view, the view Scheler favours, apprehension is no type of belief, involves no subsumption under concepts but does depend on the meanings the perceiver masters. If each of these two views is wrong, then the phenomenological version of the knowledge first view arguably loses much of its plausibility²⁴. For if it does not work for what is arguably the simplest type of apprehension, perceptual apprehension, it is unlikely to work for the other cases the phenomenologists apply it to, such as apprehension of mathematical facts or apprehension due to testimony.

Not all convictions and beliefs can be reactions to what is known. What, then, one would like to ask the early phenomenologists, does their account have to say about such cases? As far as I can see, they offer no worked out answer. But since they think that apprehension is opposed to illusion or deception (*Täuschung*) and to hallucination, and that correct belief, conviction and judgement are opposed to error (*Irrtum*) and that error and illusion are quite distinct phenomena, it would perhaps be in the spirit of their account to say that conviction and belief are reactions to what is known or to what is apparently known²⁵.

²³ Reinach 1989 120; emphasis mine- KM.

²⁴ Mertens (1927) discusses and develops the views of Reinach and von Hildebrand.

²⁵ Cf. Scheler 1955. Why « correct » rather than « true » belief, judgement and conviction? The early phenomenologists follow Husserl: beliefs and judgements are correct or incorrect,

4. A Greek Folly ?

One early phenomenologist from Göttingen was convinced that Plato's view of knowledge does not make it out to be a species of belief but rather a primitive, indefinable phenomenon - the eminent historian of science, Alexander Koyré. In his 1945 *Introduction à Platon* he argues that the ideal reader of or listener to Plato's Socratic dialogues will come away with definite and positive, true philosophical conclusions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these are often the conclusions of the early phenomenologists with whom Koyré studied in Göttingen before the Great War. One such conclusion is that knowledge is the "possession" of truth where "possession" does not mean belief or doxa²⁶. There is a positive conclusion about the nature of knowledge which can be drawn from the *Theatetus* but which Theatetus himself has not been able to draw²⁷. The conclusion that Theatetus the mathematician should have drawn is that

la science qu'elle [la démonstration mathématique] nous donne (et qui peut être le *fondement* d'un jugement ou d'une « opinion ») est tout autre chose qu'une opinion — vraie ou fausse — qui peut être fondée ou infondée, qu'une conviction dont l'âme peut être possédée²⁸

He should have seen that

la circularité nécessaire de toute définition de la science nous révèle le caractère prééminent de cette notion. La définir est tout aussi impossible que « définir » celle de l'Être. Ou du Bien²⁹

How, then, can one know what science is ? Koyré answers his question as follows :

propositions are true or false ; if the belief that *p* is correct, then it is correct *because* the proposition that *p* is true.

²⁶ Koyré's notes on lectures by Reinach in 1910 on Plato's philosophy and on Descartes have survived (Koyré 1910). Koyré is particularly concerned to show that the reader of the Socratic dialogues acquires axiological knowledge about « hierarchies » and « scales of value », that this or that value or good is higher or better than some other value or good. The echoes of Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann are unmistakable. Cf. §6 below.

²⁷ Koyré 1962 74.

²⁸ Koyré 1962 76.

²⁹ Koyré 1962 77

Justement de la même manière dont nous savons ce qu'est l'Être. D'ailleurs, Socrate nous l'a dit *expressis verbis* : la science n'est rien d'autre que la possession de la vérité. Et celle-ci n'est rien d'autre que la révélation de l'Être. Nous avons la science lorsque nous sommes dans la vérité, c'est-à-dire lorsque notre âme, en contact immédiat avec la réalité — avec l'être, — la reflète et la révèle à elle-même. Cet être, cette réalité — faut-il encore le dire? — n'est pas l'amas désordonné d'objets sensibles que le vulgaire (et le sophiste) appellent de ce nom. L'être vulgaire, mobile, instable et passager, n'est pas — ou est à peine — de l'être; il est, et il n'est pas, tout à la fois, et c'est pour cela justement qu'il n'est pas, et ne peut pas, être l'objet de la science, mais tout au plus de l'opinion. Non, l'être que nous avons en vue, c'est l'être stable et immuable de l'essence, que notre âme a contemplée jadis, ou, plus exactement, dont elle possède l'idée, vision dont elle se ressouvient — ou, du moins, dont elle peut se ressouvenir — maintenant, et dont demeurent dans l'âme des traces, des idées « innées »³⁰

5. Against conjunctivism

Part of the background to the Göttingen versions of the knowledge first view (and to the account of knowledge given by another realist, Nicolai Hartmann) is the rejection of conjunctivism, in particular of Husserl's thorough-going conjunctivism, by one of the most influential of his early followers, the realist phenomenologist, Max Scheler.

One version of conjunctivism about *perceptual reports* is the view that such reports can be analysed into a conjunction of claims, one of which attributes a perceptual state which differs in no intrinsic way from a state of hallucination and, secondly, a claim to the effect that some suitable object or state of affairs is suitably related to the perceptual state. Conjunctivism about *perception* is the view that a perceptual episode consists of a perceptual state which differs in no intrinsic way from a state of hallucination and of a relation to an object or a state of affairs. Disjunctivism about perception is, then, to begin with, the view that conjunctivism is wrong³¹. If knowledge is a simple, unanalysable relation, then, it may seem that this view entails that conjunctivism about per-

³⁰ Koyré 1962 78.

³¹ An early friend of the view now called disjunctivism is Hinton 1973. The expression „disjunctivism“ is apparently due to Howard Robinson.

ceptual knowledge is wrong. Disjunctivism is, of course, more than the mere rejection of conjunctivism. But for present purposes no positive characterisation of disjunctivism is required.

The most important criticisms of conjunctivism in early phenomenology are due to Max Scheler. In 1915 Scheler formulates the view about normal perception he rejects by using an expression due to Pascal Engel's compatriot, Hippolyte Taine: normal perception is "une hallucination vraie", a hallucination which is true. According to this view, normal perception is something which is phenomenally indistinguishable from a hallucination and differs from it only in that the fact that "something real corresponds to it", in the fact that an existential judgement based on it is true. One version of the view, he adds, has it that the state which is phenomenally indistinguishable from an hallucination is caused by the presence of an objective stimulus of the right sort³². He objects that this view is incompatible with the "difference of essence between perception and illusion"³³. Of course, a conjunctivist like Husserl can and does agree that there is a difference of essence between perception and illusion (and between knowledge and erroneous belief). But the conjunctivist view of the essential difference between perception and hallucination is wrong, Scheler thinks, because abnormal cases must be explained in terms of normal cases rather than the other way round. The normal case is not "a special case" of the abnormal case. Austin was to make a related claim: "talk of deception only *makes sense* against a background of general non-deception"³⁴.

Scheler rejects not only conjunctivism about perception but also conjunctivism about action (a rejection also to be found in the work of von Hildebrand). Scheler's analysis of action shows, he claims, that "it is a phenomenological unity and not composed of an inner act of the will and an external process of movement"³⁵; it "cannot be dissolved into any sort of composition or succession of psychological experiences and bodily movements or processes"³⁶.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Scheler rejects that version of conjunctivism about knowledge-that and apprehension which presents knowledge as a species of judgment or belief which satisfies certain condition. He does not argue against

³² Scheler 1955 250.

³³ Scheler 1955 251.

³⁴ Austin 1962 11. Marion, who quotes this passage, traces the idea back to Prichard (Marion 2000 511, 325 ff.). Criticisms of the use of the normal-abnormal distinction in Oxford ordinary language philosophy also apply to what the phenomenologists do with the distinction.

³⁵ Scheler 1971 403.

³⁶ Scheler 1966 475. Scheler's account of action is to be found in Scheler 1966 127-172.

this sort of conjunctivism in anything like the way he argues against conjunctivism about perception and action. But he does state and endorse his own, alternative view: knowledge is irreducibly relational. In 1926 he distinguishes between “the most general concept of knowledge (*Wissen*)” and apprehending. Knowledge in the widest sense is “the end (*Ziel*, aim) of all apprehending”. Knowledge as a possession, a state or disposition, is what the episode of apprehending aims at. In other words, although apprehending is ontologically prior to knowledge-that, is what brings it into being, the value of apprehending is determined by the value of knowledge-that. Knowledge must, Scheler also claims, be specified without any reference to “judgement, presentation (*Vorstellung*), inferring”. It is an ontological relation (*Seinsverhältnis*, *Seinsbeziehung*), a relation of participation between entities and not any sort of spatial, temporal or causal relation. He seems at one point to call his account of knowledge as a relation of participation a definition³⁷. But this is not a very happy use of the term since he does not analyse knowledge into components but rather specifies what sort of relation it is. And indeed a year or two later he writes that “knowledge is an ultimate, *sui generis*, and not further derivable ontological relation between two entities”³⁸.

6. Knowledge of Values and *Ought*

An account of knowledge which aims at completeness should arguably pay attention not only to the relation between discovery and enduring knowledge but also to the full variety of knowledge. This variety is not limited to the variety of *what is known* – mathematical, social, axiological, scientific etc. facts. Nor to what are sometimes called the different *sources* of knowledge, such as perception, intuition, understanding, proof and testimony. Knowledge may vary in a third way.

This can be seen by considering two different ways of understanding the ideas that knowledge has different sources and different objects. One might think that knowledge may have different sources but is itself always of the same lowest kind. Knowledge which arises out of perception is then, *qua* knowledge, in no way different from the sort of knowledge which is rooted in understanding or in calculation. Similarly, one might think that knowledge of arithmetic and knowledge of value differ only in their objects. But there is also the possibility that the differences between the sources and objects of

³⁷ Scheler 1960 203.

³⁸ Scheler 1995 188.

knowledge correlate with differences in types of knowledge, the possibility that knowledge of value and knowledge of arithmetic, say, differ intrinsically.

The accounts of knowledge given by the early, realist phenomenologists and by early Oxford philosophers take very seriously one aspect of the variety of knowledge, the variety of its objects. They aimed to give an account of what might be called theoretical knowledge and of non-theoretical knowledge which, in each case, puts knowledge first. By “non-theoretical” I mean knowledge of axiological and deontic facts, ethical, moral but also, for example, aesthetic. Within early, realist phenomenology this led to the development of the view that non-theoretical knowledge is not of the same lowest kind as theoretical knowledge. This view is to be found elsewhere in the Brentanian tradition but the commitment there to putting knowledge second led to a quite distinct account of the nature of non-theoretical knowledge. This disagreement between heirs of Brentano, as we shall see, parallels a contemporary disagreement about the nature of knowledge of value, a disagreement within the philosophy of mind rather than within mainstream epistemology.

The Göttingen-Oxford project of giving a knowledge first account of both theoretical and non-theoretical knowledge is clearly illustrated by Prichard’s famous and influential 1912 paper “Does Moral Philosophy rest on a Mistake?” and by a paper published one year earlier by the phenomenologist Alfred Brunswig, “Die Frage nach dem Grunde des sittlichen Sollens”. The question posed by Brunswig – does the moral or ethical ought have a ground or justification? – is also the question addressed by Prichard. Indeed, many of the questions addressed by Prichard are also addressed by Brunswig. The mistake on which moral philosophy rests, according to Prichard, is the view that the demand to “have it *proved* to us that we ought to do” this or that is legitimate. But this demand, he says, is “illegitimate”, there is no knowledge to be had which would satisfy the demand³⁹. This illegitimate demand, he says, parallels another demand in the Theory of Knowledge, a demand concerning what I have called theoretical knowledge. He contends

that the existence of the whole subject [Moral Philosophy], as usually understood, rests on a mistake, and on a mistake parallel to that on which rests, as I myself think, the subject usually called the Theory of Knowledge⁴⁰.

³⁹ Prichard 1912 36.

⁴⁰ Prichard 1912 21.

[J]ust as we try to find a proof, based on the general consideration of action and of human life, that we ought to act in the ways usually called moral, so, we, like Descartes, propose by a reflexion on our thinking to find a test of knowledge, i.e. a principle by applying which we can show that a certain condition of mind was really knowledge⁴¹.

He also calls such a test a “criterion” and says that the “search for this criterion and the application of it, when found, is what is called the Theory of Knowledge”⁴².

Prichard’s alternative to the vain project of trying to find a proof of what we ought to do is the claim that there is “an absolutely underivative or immediate” “apprehension” of moral obligations, of the rightness of actions⁴³.

Brunswig, too, rejects the demand for a ground of our particular obligations⁴⁴ and argues for a direct apprehension of our duties:

The obtaining of the genuine moral or ethical (*sittlich*) ought is not something which is self-evident in virtue of the concept and value of the moral or ethical nor can it be indirectly deduced, it is rather certain for everyone in certain facts of consciousness. The unconditional obligation to act rightly is as a particular fact directly graspable (*erschauubar*). . . [I]t is a state of affairs I apprehend⁴⁵.

This *apprehension* that my duty is to do this or that in turn grounds or justifies a *conviction* to this effect⁴⁶ but is not any such conviction. The fact apprehended, an ought-to-do, is “in a certain sense. . . *unprovable* but nevertheless completely certain thanks to the direct intuition every one has”⁴⁷. Brunswig

⁴¹ Prichard 1912 22.

⁴² Prichard 1912 34. This characterisation of the theory of knowledge is also that given by Nelson (1908) who also argues that the search for a criterion of knowledge is and must be vain. The title of his book in English is : *On the so called Problem of Knowledge*. In the first part of the book Nelson sets out what he calls a general proof of the impossibility of the theory of knowledge (Nelson 1908 29-105). As Chisholm has pointed, out, referring to a later paper by Nelson: « It is instructive to compare what Nelson says here about theory of knowledge to what H. A. Prichard said about moral philosophy [in Prichard 1912] » (Chisholm 1979 53 n. 2.)

⁴³ Prichard 1912 27.

⁴⁴ Although duties cannot be grounded, Brunswig thinks, like Scheler, that a duty may have a partial ground, which is axiological : if I ought to *F*, this is in part because *x* is or would be valuable.

⁴⁵ Brunswig 1911 44.46.

⁴⁶ Brunswig 1911 44.

⁴⁷ Brunswig 1911 49, emphasis mine –KM.

distinguishes sharply between contingent and non-contingent ethical, moral and other axiological and normative facts. The fact that I ought to do this or that, he correctly points out, is a contingent fact, “an empirical fact, not a conceptual necessity”⁴⁸. There are, of course, he thinks, like all the phenomenologists, non-contingent axiological and deontic facts. One such, he argues, is the fact that all acting *ought to be* moral or ethical. (Like other early phenomenologists, Brunswig is a fan of Sidgwick’s distinction between *ought-to-do* and *ought-to-be*. Prichard, on the other hand, thinks that all *oughts* are *oughts-to-do*). A similar distinction seems to be implied by various remarks made by Prichard⁴⁹.

On one point our Göttingen and Oxford ethical-or-moral-knowledge-first philosophers differ. According to Brunswig my grasp of my duty is a type of practical experience. It is of course also, as we have seen, an apprehending. But it is not the apprehending peculiar to theoretical knowledge. It is “perhaps an act of feeling, of affective apprehending (*fühlenden Erkennens*)⁵⁰”. Prichard gives little sign of agreeing with Brunswig’s suggestion. The apprehending of mathematical facts and of moral duties differ, it seems, on his view, only with respect to their objects and genesis. Like so many other English intuitionists, Prichard seems to think that intuition is always cold. It is however worth noting that Prichard frequently employs the verb “appreciate” when talking of the apprehension of duties: “the real nature of our apprehension or appreciation of moral obligations”; “appreciation [is] an activity of *moral* thinking”; he even refers to the “sense” that something is owing⁵¹.

The idea that there is an affective apprehending, first published by Brunswig (and Reinach) was enthusiastically endorsed by many heirs of Brentano from around 1907/8. It rapidly came to be thought of as our primary mode of access, not (as Brunswig suggested) to duties or oughts, but rather to value, the value of objects and persons and states of affairs. The view comes in two versions, one for friends of the knowledge first option, the other for enemies thereof.

Husserl and (late) Meinong both argue that in certain optimal circumstances emotions disclose value. Versions of their view have become very popular within one pocket of the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of emotions. Episodic emotions or affects, it is said there, can disclose or reveal

⁴⁸ Brunswig 1911 49.

⁴⁹ Prichard 1912 28.

⁵⁰ Brunswig 1911 47.

⁵¹ Prichard 1912 27, 28, 29.

value⁵². They are able to do this above all because of a property emotions share with beliefs and judgments. Emotions, like beliefs and judgments, are either correct or incorrect. Thus it is argued that an emotion which is correct and which satisfies certain other conditions counts as knowledge of value. I apprehend the injustice of a situation through the emotion of indignation provided my indignation is correct. Thus the view of theoretical knowledge which puts belief (suitably qualified) first has an exact counterpart, the view of non-theoretical knowledge which puts emotions (suitably qualified) first.

Early phenomenological friends of the primacy of knowledge make two claims, as we have seen, which yield objections to this view. First, indignation is triggered by knowledge or apparent knowledge of injustice. This knowledge or apparent knowledge cannot be constituted by an emotion if a regress is to be avoided. Second, indignation, like all emotions, is a reaction and an attitude. But knowledge is neither a reaction nor an attitude. The correct alternative, according to Brunswig, Reinach, Scheler, von Hildebrand and Hartmann, is that the affective apprehension of value involves no emotions but rather *Wertfühlen*, not feelings or emotions but *feeling*: we feel the injustice of a situation. But such feeling of a value, being struck by injustice, shamefulness, dumpiness, elegance or funniness, is not itself either a *pro* or a *contra* stance or attitude; it is what triggers such attitudes, in particular emotions and beliefs. Feeling value, being struck by value, is a type of episode which corresponds to the state or disposition ascribed when we say of someone that he has no sense of or for beauty or injustice, that sensibility to this or that type value is not part of his make-up, that he is blind to this or that range of values. Theoretical apprehension, then, as before, differs radically from non-theoretical apprehension but not because the latter involves emotions. The (apparent) feeling of value is prior to emotions and belief, just as (apparent) theoretical knowledge is prior to belief⁵³.

Many of Brentano's heirs, then, seem happy to allow that apprehending comes in different, lowest kinds. But, as we have seen, friends and enemies of the knowledge first view give rival accounts of what these kinds are. Must a philosophy of knowledge assert either that knowledge always comes first or that it always comes second? Scheler is a philosopher who puts knowledge first in his accounts of most kinds of knowledge but allows for one case where knowledge comes second. The case in question concerns knowledge of value-relations. Any account of knowledge of value has to give an account of

⁵² Cf. Tappolet 2000, Johnston 2001, Deonna & Teroni 2012.

⁵³ Cf. Mulligan 2007, 2009, 2010.

knowledge of value-relations, of one thing or state of affairs being worse than another, of relations of height between value (justice is higher in value, more important than prettiness)⁵⁴. According to Scheler, knowledge of relations of height between values is constituted by a type of preferring, preferring which is given as being correct or self-evident⁵⁵. On this matter, then, he finds himself obliged to agree with Brentano, the grandfather of all twentieth century philosophies which put knowledge in second place⁵⁶.

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⁵⁴ Cf. note 25.

⁵⁵ Since Scheler also thinks that such preferring is prior to all feeling of value, his entire account of the affective apprehension of value is, contrary to some of his rhetoric, at bottom a knowledge second account.

⁵⁶ I am grateful to Julien Deonna for many brief but stimulating discussions of the history of the view that knowledge is justified true belief and for comments on an earlier version of this paper; to Arturs Logins for discussion of the project he is pursuing with Paolo Crivelli on knowledge first views in ancient philosophy; and to Alessandro Salice, Barry Smith and Peter Simons for their suggestions.

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