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978-0-521-31015-4 - The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science: A Logical  
Introduction to the Historical Sciences, (Abridged Edition)

Heinrich Rickert

Excerpt

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# The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science

HEINRICH RICKERT

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## From the Preface to the First Edition

I have been working on a theory of scientific concept formation since my doctoral dissertation, *Zur Lehre der Definition* (1888). Even then I opposed the idea of a universal method based on natural science, and I tried to demonstrate the emptiness of the doctrine according to which the common elements of things are the same as the essential features of concepts. It had become clear to me both that we always need a specific purpose with reference to which the essential features are distinguished from the inessential, and also that methodology is obliged to identify the diversity of these purposes in order to understand the variety of scientific methods and do justice to it. In my book *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* (1892), I attempted to establish both a general epistemological “standpoint” for my further work and a theoretical basis for the primacy of practical reason. Thereafter I returned to methodological investigations. Very soon, however, I saw that the attempt to develop a theory of concept formation embracing all the sciences posed incalculable difficulties owing to the immense body of specialized scientific knowledge that would be required. So I tried to limit myself, above all attempting to understand the nature of *historical* concept formation – first, because this is the area to which logic has thus far contributed least; in addition, because an insight into the fundamental difference between historical thought and thought in the natural sciences proved to be the most important point for understanding all specialized scientific activity; and finally, because it also seemed to me that this insight was an essential condition for the treatment of most philosophical problems or questions of *weltanschauung*. Here logical theory is employed to oppose naturalism and also to ground a historically oriented philosophical idealism.

My view of the relationship between the concept and empirical reality in general, the view that is decisive for the whole of the subsequent train of thought, was first published in an essay, “Zur Theorie der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung,” in *Avenarius’ Vierteljahresschrift* for 1894. Two years later, the first three chapters of

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this book appeared. Above all, their aim was to show that the method of natural science is *not* applicable to history. As the *negative* part of the work, they form a self-contained whole. In the subsequent lecture *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (1899), I attempted to sketch, as simply as possible, the basic outlines of a *positive* account of the logical nature of history. . . .

. . . At the time I planned my work, the theme of historical method was not an important issue at all in the discipline of history itself. Nor could one have any reason to expect that quite soon specialists would return to the discussion of this question. In those days, however, I would have considered it the least plausible of all possibilities that even in historical circles, the old idea of the “elevation of history to the status of a science” by means of the method of natural science would reappear so soon and prove itself capable of attracting attention; for at that time, the belief in Buckle and related thinkers seemed to be thoroughly discredited in the province of history and retained a role only in naturalistic philosophy. Today, nevertheless, the old speculations of the Enlightenment are treated as the most novel and important achievements of history. For this reason, I thought it necessary to demonstrate the conceptual confusions that lie at the basis of these views, and especially to clear up the ambiguity of the shibboleths with which these basically antiquated theories are again defended in our own time. . . .

At this point, a brief word about my mode of exposition: On the basis of the limits of concept formation in natural science, I try to understand the nature of history as it actually exists. I do not, for example, draw up plans for sciences of the future. At the same time, however, it is far from my intention simply to *analyze* or describe history as it is. On the contrary, I want to discover the inner logical structure of all historical concept formation. For this reason, I am obliged to begin with quite general concepts that contain very little of what is usually called history. Gradually, I add one element after another to these concepts. As a result, the concept that conforms to the sciences that are conventionally called historical is not identified until the conclusion of the fourth chapter. The consequence of this *synthetic* procedure is not only the disagreeable fact that one must read the entire book to know what I think. It is also necessary to suspend judgment concerning the soundness of my position until the conclusion. Nevertheless, even with the best intentions, I could not make any changes in this regard.

Freiburg i.B., January 1902

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## From the Preface to the Third and Fourth Editions

. . . As regards the use of the words “actuality” (*Wirklichkeit*) and “reality” (*Realität*), they have the same meaning in this work. Moreover, they are used to refer to both physical and psychic being as it exists in its pure facticity, independent both of its conceptual transformation by science and also of every meaning and value with which it is linked. Perhaps what is merely real or what is merely actual never directly presents itself to us with this sort of purity. But we have to try to identify it, and thus form a concept of it, if we want to achieve clarity concerning the nature of the sciences of reality (*Realwissenschaften*). In the ensuing, therefore, I designate as actual or real the methodologically unanalyzed and value-free material of individual research. Perhaps it will be said that my concept of reality, which follows from this definition, is positivist. It may also be claimed that because this concept was developed at a time when positivist trends prevailed, my terminology makes a concession to positivism. As regards these claims, one should not fail to see how far removed my views are from any form of positivism, given that I try to show that even the immediately given world cannot be comprehended as purely real in the positivistic sense. Of course, everyone is free to reject the term “real” as designating the scientifically unanalyzed material of the sciences of reality and to reserve it instead for formations concerning which the following is believed. Their actually existing content corresponds precisely to the content of our *concepts* of the real. Anyone committed to this sort of *conceptual realism* must deny genuine reality to what I call the real. But anyone who takes this view is obliged to apply it consistently. In that case, peculiar consequences follow. For example, the paper on which this book is printed, just as we see it, cannot be called real. Nor is it any more legitimate to apply this term to our psychic acts of perception. If we ascribe reality not only to formations of this sort but also to the content of our concepts of them, we will never arrive at a clear and consistent way of expressing ourselves. At this point we confront an absolute alternative that we

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cannot escape. Since I am aware of no scholarly or scientific work in which the repudiation of the positivist concept of reality is carried out with complete terminological rigor, I will retain the positivist *terminology*. That is, I will call “real” the same thing that positivism designates as real. This is the surest way of avoiding every form of positivist conceptual nominalism as well as every form of metaphysical conceptual realism.

But the foregoing account does not seem sufficient to understand the language used here. In addition to the concept of reality employed by conceptual realism, there is another more comprehensive concept, of which the concept considered earlier forms a special case. In general, it can be called the concept of *value realism*. It is expressed in a thesis of Hegel’s: The rational is the real, and the real is the rational. Obviously Hegel did not intend to apply the term “rational” to objects such as this piece of paper, which we all call real. As a consistent conceptual realist, he would have to deny that such an object qualifies as genuine reality. But he did mean that, even in our ordinary view, a purely *contingent existence* does not deserve the emphatic name of “reality”! This word by itself already shows that both reason and reality, although admittedly they did not signify a norm or a prescriptive standard for Hegel, nevertheless certainly did designate a *value*; for only concerning the meaningful or what has the status of a value can it be said that it deserves an emphatic name. No sort of emphasis can be ascribed to what is value free. The famous Hegelian thesis, therefore, has the following consequence: Only what has meaning or value – which, in this book, is called the nonreal – is acknowledged as “real.” Or, at most, actual entities insofar as meaning or value can be ascribed to them qualify as real. Assuming that such a terminology could be consistently employed, there is nothing objectionable about it. Not even Hegel himself, however, – not to mention other value realists – managed to do this. Thus in opposition not only to conceptual realism but also to every form of value realism, I remain terminologically committed to the positivist concept of reality. In consequence, I try to make an absolute distinction between reality itself and all “emphatic” meanings, in conformity with the nature of the empirical sciences of reality, the sciences of physical and psychic being. Of course, this also leads to formulations that some will find paradoxical. But there is no terminology that fails to conflict with ordinary language in the use of the expressions “actual” and “real.” For this reason, it is a question of choosing the lesser evil. From this perspective and in opposition to Hegel’s usage, I stipulate the following thesis as governing the use of these concepts in this book: *The rational is not restricted to the real, and what is only real is not yet*

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*rational.* Those who observe this rule will at least know what I mean by the actual or the real.

Finally, my position on the question of “rationalism,” so much discussed today, is also closely related to the concept of reality. In publishing the first chapters of this book twenty-five years ago, I tried to prove that the real is the limit of all scientific concept formation. At that time, I was attacked because of my *irrationalism*. More recently – and especially since the appearance of my book on *Lebensphilosophie*,<sup>1</sup> the basic ideas of which had already appeared in the journal *Logos* ten years before – I am chided as a rationalist. *Tempora mutantur*. For myself, I believe that I have not altered my position on rationalism and that I am neither a rationalist nor an irrationalist. From my perspective, of course, anything that is merely real bears an irrational stamp. But the name “irrationalism” is not appropriate for my philosophical standpoint. This is because I am very far from identifying the world in its totality with the purely real and irrational world. I do not doubt that there are eminently rational formations such as concepts. Although the entire content of reality itself can never be subsumed under them, they are theoretically or rationally valid for reality. In particular, I hold that science is possible only on the basis of concepts and, in this sense, only on the basis of *ratio*. On the other hand, this circumstance does not justify calling my view rationalistic. Quite irrespective of the real, I hold that theoretical or rational formulations of meaning are not the only entities to which validity can be ascribed. For this reason, I try to show that philosophy – if it proposes to become truly universal – must also take extratheoretical or irrational values into account. Accordingly, I discern the irrational not only in the real but also in the domain of the nonreal or that which holds validly, and I reject every position to which the name of rationalism is appropriate. In this respect, I might be called an *antirationalist*. But it remains true that slogans such as rationalism and irrationalism have nothing at all to say that bears on my position. My endeavor is always to do justice to both the irrational and the rational components of the world. This also holds for my book on *Lebensphilosophie*; even though, in the polemic against fashionable movements of irrationality, the significance of the rational belonged in the foreground. Of course, it seems to me that the irrational is *scientifically* admissible in one way only: by forming *concepts* of it. This is because whatever we have not somehow conceived and whatever we are unable to designate by means of rationally comprehensible words cannot be spoken of in science at all, regardless of how suprarational

<sup>1</sup>[*Die Philosophie des Lebens*] (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920).]

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the content may be of that from which we form our concepts. To this extent, all scientific theorists must decisively commit themselves to the clarity and penetrating force of rational thought, especially in opposition to the romantic excesses and insipid aestheticism of our own time, in Germany largely the outcome of an exhausted and purely imitative idolization of Nietzsche. If this qualifies as rationalism, there is no science that does not proceed rationalistically.

Although rational factors can make up only a small part of the world, the exclusive task of science is to reach the conceptual clarity of theoretical insight, and in this sense to master its subject matter by means of *ratio*. Quite early, this conviction linked me spiritually with the man to whose memory the new edition of this book is dedicated. Since the dedication is not intended merely as an expression of personal friendship, I should like to say a few words about this too.

My more intimate relationship with Max Weber goes back to the time in Freiburg when we were both at the beginning of our academic careers. Weber always remained not only a man of science but also a political man. An ardent patriotism and a powerful temperament did not make it easy for him to separate the theoretically justifiable factors from the impact of the suprarational powers of life in the historically oriented economic theory on which he lectured. Weber's intellect was no less powerful than his will, and the need to attain clarity, especially concerning what in history qualifies as "science" in the strict sense, was all the more intensive in his case. As young men, the common interest in this question, which I had attacked from a different and purely theoretical aspect, brought us together intellectually. At first, of course, there is a certain sense in which we quickly came into conflict. Windelband's lecture on history and natural science, which appeared at that time, provoked Weber's opposition. The "idiographic" method, in his view, would amount to aestheticism. Even after reading the first three chapters of this book and seeing that what I required for history were not the "configurations" of Windelband but, rather, individual *concepts*, he still took the view that my attempt to develop a logic of history was not *feasible*. Often he told me that I would never complete this work. In Weber's view, although the material set out in the first three chapters was sound, it posed an irresolvable problem for me because history cannot be understood as a pure science. It was not until 1902, long after he had left Freiburg and when I gave him the two final chapters, on historical concept formation and historical objectivity, that he became one of the first to be convinced that on the basis of my concept of the theoretical value relationship, the conceptual method of the science of history can correctly be characterized as that of an individualizing science of

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culture. Shortly thereafter, he developed the consequences of this insight for his own science in methodological works, which, to me, remain the most splendid result of my efforts to reach enlightenment concerning the logical nature of all history. Thus, for me, there was a powerful desire to link this book to the name of Weber, in grateful recollection of the unforgettable Freiburg period of the development of my ideas. When I wrote it, I learned much from his objections.

Nevertheless, the relations between Weber's work and mine extend farther than this. It seems to me that Weber – assuming that one undertakes to classify this altogether incomparable man – was one of the great historians. At the same time, however, he was motivated by a powerful drive for systematic construction, which is seldom found in historians. Especially in later years, this led him to develop the same material of his historical research in the direction of generalizations and, in this sense, ahistorically. Eventually he came to describe his last works as “sociology,” thereby ascribing a new significance to the name that, since Comte, has been much used and abused. A harsh fate, the oppressive meaninglessness of which made it difficult to bear, tore him from the midst of his most intensive and extensive original work in this new sphere of activity. Thus the work of this scholar – as a whole man, capable as few are of forming a whole work – inevitably remained a fragment, as if the infirmity of our time could no longer endure anything whole. Nevertheless, the extraordinarily intense productivity of his last period created enough for us to see the outlines of the imposing system. Especially for the theory of science as I pursue it, there is little that would be more instructive than this powerful torso. Here we can see how a body of material – almost superabundant and in part completely irrational – can be rationally dominated by the power of the human mind. If we want to characterize Weber in a scientific or scholarly fashion, we should not call him a philosopher. That word applies to him only in a very vague sense. As Weber himself often stressed, it was not his intention to work in academic philosophy. Finally, we cannot do justice to the significance of this unique man by numbering him, as even Troeltsch does, among the neo-Kantians, going so far as to refer to him, along with Windelband and myself, as “the third chief figure” of the Southwest German “school.” We could take pride in this if it were true. Intellectually, however, Weber was not a member, to use Goethe's expression, of any guild. On the contrary, his scientific greatness consists in the fact that he created a *cultural science* that – in the connection it establishes between *history* and *systematics* – will not fit any of the usual methodological schemata. Precisely in this way, *specialized research* is directed along new paths. I wanted to stress this in the



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preface to a book in which I try to exhibit the profusion of the *different* forms in which the scientific life can develop. Whenever I want to call to mind a dramatic example of the scope of which the human intellect is capable, even when it is most rigorously limited to what can be conceptually grasped within the confines of a specialized discipline, I can never do better than to consider the work of Max Weber.

I can no longer submit my work to my friend's scholarly and personal interest, which was always lively. I can only dedicate it to his memory. There is another special reason why this is profoundly painful to me. While he was still alive and I was writing the first part of my *System der Philosophie*, there was no reader I wanted more than him. Weber had formed a rather one-sided view of philosophy as a science and its contemporary possibilities. Put another way, he really believed only in "logic." Thus he was also "skeptical" about my plan for a universal and scientific theory of *weltanschauung* based on a comprehensive system of values, an undertaking of which my theory of science forms only a part – just as, earlier in Freiburg, he had been skeptical about my plan for a logic of history. However, it goes without saying that he was very far removed from every sort of relativism to which the weaklings of modern philosophy are committed. He also had a pronounced and quite justified aversion to everything he regarded as *Gartenlaube*, in other words, all scientific or scholarly feuilletonism.<sup>2</sup> This made him suspicious of a philosophy of art, religion, or even love grounded on a theory of values. Weber's personality, however, towered so high not least because he was capable of such an astonishing and impersonal objectivity, and he had never shown himself to be unteachable. In his last letter to me, he expressed an intense interest in the development of my system. It is no longer possible for me to convince him through my completed work that today even a philosophy proceeding in a strictly scientific fashion need not restrict itself to "logic."

Concerning what his loss means to me *personally*, I will remain silent. Anyone who has ever felt merely a touch of the spirit of this man,

<sup>2</sup>[The literal meaning is "arbor," but in this context it refers to the weekly family magazine of the same name. Founded as a popular literary, political, and scientific journal with liberal pretensions in 1852, and inspired by the unsuccessful attempt four years earlier in Frankfurt am Main to found a German parliament on liberal and democratic principles, within ten years *Die Gartenlaube* reached a circulation of 100,000. After 1900, however, the magazine became increasingly sentimental and traditional, unabashed in its advocacy of the most reactionary German cultural values. In its appeal to sensibilities Weber regarded as flaccid and hypocritical, it represented the sort of false intellectual, emotional, and moral seriousness that offended his own standards of honesty, conscience, and what he ironically called good taste.]

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equally great in his goodness of heart and in his acuteness of understanding, will surmise what my scholarly and personal relationship to Weber – extending, as it did, through nearly an entire lifetime, frequently interrupted by external fate, but never inwardly troubled – has meant to me. In that case, he must also understand that it is not easy to speak about it with the requisite propriety.

*Heidelberg, October, 1921*