Herbart, Parrini, and Conceptual Engineering

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates Paolo Parrini's use of Johann Friedrich Herbart's notion of *Bearbeitung der Begriffe* ("treatment of concepts") to outline a philosophical perspective integrating heterodox Kantian elements into contemporary conceptual engineering. It first presents Herbart's functionalist, anti-foundationalist reading of Kant, centered on defining philosophy as the treatment of scientific concepts through analysis and synthesis. It then analyzes how Parrini traces the Herbartian metaphilosophical approach along a philosophical tradition connecting post-Kantian epistemology to 20th-century analytic philosophy. Across more than twenty years of research, Parrini defines the «Herbartian component» of analytical philosophy as the potential source of a philosophical program against the reduction of philosophy to mere conceptual analysis. According to Parrini, Herbart's key insight is that conceptual engineering involves not just analysis but also synthetic reconstruction, interpreting concepts as logical components constitutive of the thinking subject's perpetual re-orientation within experience's shifting dynamics. Parrini highlights the ethical responsibility implicit in engineering concepts conceived this way. The paper concludes by suggesting that Herbart's and Parrini's contribution to contemporary conceptual engineering would make conceptual engineering more apt to the ethical tasks traditionally attributed to philosophy from a Kantian perspective.

1. Introduction

Those who knew Paolo Parrini may recall how he distinctly conveyed, in every moment of his teaching and personal interactions, the impression of embodying a philosophical ethos. One finds an echo of this ethos in his thoughts about what philosophy could and should be.

Parrini's metaphilosophical discussions do not aim to enable a systematic philosophical method (Parrini 2009: 96-97). However, they are animated by a constant regard to some general methodological and ethical principles: clear reasoning, pluralistic method, modest claims, and balance. Such

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principles seamlessly connect to the style and contents of his epistemological work, which consistently reserves an irreplaceable role to the regulative function of practical ideals for scientific research (as some general presentations of Parrini's epistemological proposal do not fail to note, see, e.g., Lanfredini 2013: 349-350 and Pace Giannotta 2018: 263).

Something else that brings cohesion to Parrini's metaphilosophical discussions is that almost all of them mention Johann Friedrich Herbart. These mentions often concern the well-known Herbartian thesis that philosophy is the *Bearbeitung der Begriffe*, the 'working out' or 'treatment' of concepts. This was a motto of the Herbartian school, dominant in Germany from the mid-19th-century until the neo-Kantian period (Hayward & Thomas 1903: 36-76). The related conception of philosophy weakened along with the end of the Herbartian dominance in the German philosophical debate. However, recent scholarship on analytic philosophy's 'continental' origins has recognized a revival of Herbartian concepts in contemporary analytical philosophy (e.g., van der Schaar 2013: 48 and Beiser 2022). Parrini himself is among the first European scholars to have worked in this direction (see Parrini self-testimony in Parrini 1998: XIII; on that same page, Herbart's *Bearbeitung der Begriffe* is explicitly associated with conceptual engineering).

Parrini's attention to Herbart remains constant over a broad period. One of his last writings is a short metaphilosophical essay (Parrini 2022). This essay is implicitly expressive, due to the nature of the volume in which it is collected (Lanfredini 2022), of how Parrini conceives his philosophical method and ethos. It opens with a paragraph on Herbart, whose metaphilosophical conception is then merged into Carnap's theory of rational explication and, with this, inserted into the mainstream of the analytic tradition. However, to my knowledge, Parrini never provided an explicit and comprehensive explanation of the connection between the Herbartian metaphilosophical thesis, conceptual engineering and Kantian philosophy, which he has presented as the «main source» of his thought (Parrini 2011: 155).

This study reconstructs the connection between Herbart's metaphilosophy, Parrini's Kantian philosophical ethos (along with the ethical values it consistently expresses), and conceptual engineering. In the wake of Parrini's use of Herbart, it also suggests a potential productive integration between the Herbartian version of Kantianism and the today's mainstream interest in conceptual engineering as a philosophical method and metaphilosophical issue.

Consider two mainstream definitions of conceptual engineering. Cappelen & Plunkett (2020: 3) define it as the non-exclusive disjunction of three practices: «(I) The assessment of representational devices, (II) reflections on and proposals for how to improve representational devices, and (III) efforts to implement the proposed improvements». Chalmers (2020) defines it simply as «designing, implementing, and evaluating concepts». The latter definition has the merit of coming from a figure representative of contemporary philosophical trends. However, it shows a flaw, or at least a form of partiality, which will become evident only later. The first definition is more comprehensive. However, it is also generic: while concepts can be considered representational devices, not all representational devices are concepts. Moreover, it is reasonable to suspect that concepts are also something else or at least serve other functions as well.

Herbart, for example, writes that «Every thought, considered merely according to its quality [of being thought], is a concept in the logical sense» (Herbart 1850: 160). For him, concepts are primarily contents of thought, that anyone can think independently of their individual psychological conditions. Therefore, they are not psychological, but logical elements capable of offering a shared semantic reference to the myriads of psychological activities involved in the representational and epistemic efforts of each one of us. A concept in the Herbartian sense must be capable of tolerating a wide variety of psychological differences and unifying them into a compact outcome. It must be capable of remaining the same through the different psychological contingencies that make up the actual act of thinking, otherwise there would be no determined 'something' to think about. It follows that the act of thinking and the thought must be distinguished. As distinguished from the related thinking acts, concepts are thought contents that not only represent something or refer to something, but also allow something to be thought of. Herbart was one of the first to propose this distinction (Tripodi 2015: 31).

Parrini's tracing of the «Herbartian component» (Parrini 2004: 283) of 19th and 20th-century analytical philosophy provides a guiding thread for integrating Herbart's concept of 'concept' and current mainstream conceptual engineering. Parrini suggests that what conceptual engineering has to learn from Herbart concerns the close correlation between linguistic-conceptual analysis and synthetic, rational reconstruction. This correlation has both an ethical and a methodological meaning. The Herbartian conceptual engineer should always refer back to a concrete constructive purpose, bearing in mind

the actual implementability of the concept in use within a given context, and conversely support and revise their creative efforts through analyzing established linguistic-conceptual uses.

Outlining this idea of an ethos for conceptual engineering will be my way of describing an aspect of the fascinating philosophical and pedagogical stance of Paolo Parrini – who was not only a keen and rigorous conceptual engineer, but also a wonderful teacher. This study counts three main sections: one on Herbart and his notion of *Bearbeitung der Begriffe*, one on Parrini's use of it, and one on the potential integration of this Herbartian concept, as employed by Parrini, in contemporary practices of conceptual engineering.

2. Herbart's «treatment of concepts»

The premise to a proper understanding of Johann Friedrich Herbart's (1776-1841) metaphilosophy is the understanding of its central role in his philosophical work[1]. In life, Herbart explicitly recognized his own philosophy as a counter to Schelling's dominant idealism[2]. When Schelling and Hegel's fame faded

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[1] The persistence, centrality and coherence of some of Herbart's fundamental metaphilosophical theses become evident when one considers, for instance, the theses he presented in 1802 for the public discussion required to obtain his doctorate in philosophy. The first three theses stated: «1. Philosophy in general is an attempt to find necessary connections in our thinking. 2. Metaphysics connects all inquiries which in some manner search for the ultimate in our cognition. 3. Metaphysics, not to mention philosophy, cannot constitute an absolute unity» (Beiser 2022: 70-71). Herbart would go on to maintain all these theses in his mature work. As for example Pettoello (2012: 7) claims, there is in fact a substantial unity and continuity to the Herbartian thought.

[2] See especially Herbart's 1814 pamphlet: *Über meinen Streit mit der Modephilosophie dieser Zeit* (Herbart 1851: 317–52). See also Beiser 2022: 153-158. As Beiser shows, the definition of philosophy as the treatment of concepts plays a key role in the polemic between Herbart and Schelling: Herbart's metaphilosophical positioning is also, at the same time, his alignment against Schelling's speculative idealism. Beiser speaks of 'romanticism' rather than 'idealism' for reasons inherent to the argument he develops in the book, relating to the persistence of idealistic elements in Herbartian thought. One can agree or disagree with this thesis. But the essential point of these pages is different: the enemy against which Herbart aligns himself, represented by Schelling, is not properly either the idealist or the romantic, but the mystic, the friend of *Schwarmerei*. Herbart is anti-idealist and anti-romantic to the extent that idealism and romanticism contain, in his eyes, elements of *Schwarmerei*. Therefore, to the extent that he wants to be a 'scientific' philosopher. My preference for 'idealistic' over 'romantic' is motivated by my interest in Herbart's critical realism. But, as always with negative concepts, since 'idealism' and 'roman-

in the 1850s, Herbart's thought remained prominent thanks to a Herbartian school widely spread across German, Austrian, and Bohemian universities until the late 1800s (Siebert 1898: 136-183) – as well as thanks to the enormous success of Herbartianism in pedagogy in English-speaking countries. From the 1870s onwards, the ascendant neo-Kantianism diminished Herbart's sway. Still, Herbartianism remained a pillar of German and European philosophy until after World War I. Then, amid the flourishing of phenomenology, empiricism, existentialism and *Lebensphilosophie*, Herbart, along with other defining figures of 19th-century German thought, swiftly plunged into obscurity. From the 1950s onwards, the historiographical canon of German post-Kantian philosophy coalesced around the idealist triad of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, while Herbart suffered comparative neglect (Beiser 2022: 1-2). But this neglect should not imply Herbartian philosophy grew obsolete. To the contrary: at the height of the analytic/continental divide, when analytics proclaimed a revolutionary approach, the neglect of Herbart's uncomfortably 'proto-analytical' ideas was likely caused, on both sides, by their unsettling modernity.

The essence of Herbart's modernity lies in his functionalist, anti-foundationalist interpretation of Kantian philosophy, of its task and development. This kind of reading of Kant became popular, in the analytical philosophical debate, only in the 1960s with Strawson and others (Westphal 2010) – so, more than a century after Herbart's work.

The main obstacle to its early success was the ideal-historical reading of Kant's transcendental idealism naturally progressing into speculative idealism – a schema itself modeled by Hegel (Förster 2012: 277-305). It presumed Kant's philosophy to be an (incomplete) effort in founding knowledge on self-evident principles that would be immune from the skeptical doubt represented by the empiricist tradition. The operations of Kantian subjectivity were seen by Hegel as the transitional and unifying space between logic and ontology, between atemporal necessity and temporal dynamics. To this role of subjectivity is to be traced back the sense of that 'speculative' which ended up featuring alongside 'idealism' instead of 'transcendental' (Krijnen 2022).

However, another post-Kantian interpretative tradition, based on a radically different reading of Kantian philosophy (Damböck 2017: 2-50), did

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ticism' can both be understood in many ways, so too can their opposite terms be interpreted according to many different perspectives.

not empower the meaning of 'transcendental' with an ontological significance (thus making it 'speculative'), but instead disempowered 'idealism' from universal-structural to local-normative status – thus making it 'psychologism' (Rath 1994: 31-42). These alternative Kantians did not want to ground every possible rationality, every possible idealizing activity, on indestructible foundations, but rather to limit the claims of metaphysics by tracing back scientific knowledge to psychological and anthropological functions. Herbart stood out among them as the most radical adversary of speculative idealism.

It is within this conflict that he took on the title of 'realist' by opposition to idealists (Beiser 2022: 279-280). He did call himself a Kantian – but a modern, unorthodox one: a Kantian of 1828, «not from the time of categories and the *Critique of Judgment*» (Herbart 1892: 13; on Herbart as a 'neo-Kantian', see also Beiser 2014: 89-141). Indeed, a realist Kantian can only be an unorthodox Kantian. However, as Lotze already recognized, the basis of Herbart's realism is not ontology, but methodology (Lotze 1882: 91).

Herbart's realism is rooted in the fundamental methodological decision of all transcendental psychologism: the disempowerment from a universal-structural idealism to a local-normative psychologism. The expression 'idealism' implies a strong assertion concerning the difference between phenomena and things-in-themselves. From a critical philosophy perspective, it is a strong assertion because it concerns (even if only indirectly) the ontological status of phenomena and the notoriously problematic position of a thing-in-itself. The adjective 'transcendental', meanwhile, has an essentially defective character: it does not concern objects, but the a priori conditions for knowing about them. On the one hand, then, the transcendental laws of the constitution of phenomena are constitutive of the phenomena themselves, and thus of reality as it is given in experience; on the other, they are the a priori conditions of our knowledge of objects, but, if transcendental knowledge proceeds from the fact of the sciences as they are instituted and function within human culture, *only* of *our* knowledge. Either then, they are laws in a sense analogous to physical laws, in that nothing pertinent to the legislated domain can be constituted in violation of them; or they are laws in the sense of positive laws, in that they are norms one can observe or not (under penalty of consequences). From a logical-transcendental point of view, these two alternatives are incompatible: either the laws are used in a constitutive sense, or they are used in a normative-regulative sense. But their incompatibility on the transcendental level is in a dilemmatic relationship with a different relation on the epistemic level, that is,

on the level of knowledge of objects: once a norm of knowledge is seen as local, as limited to our perspective, it ultimately proves optional from the perspective of pure rationality, and thus its normative value for a general theory of rationality decays. On the one hand, normativity and universality are incompatible; on the other, they are structurally correlated[3].

While speculative idealism absorbed normativity into universality, Herbart chose normativity without universality, on the one hand, and an anthropologically localized theory of rationality as opposed to a general one on the other. This is why his choice to systematically correlate the relations internal to phenomenal appearances, as far as they are at least in part independent of our thinking, to a factual given that is already there for us, is primarily a methodological decision, namely an empiricist one.

It is a decision concerning the kind of semiotics one wants to frame phenomenal relations in: either real being is just noumenally supposed as a reality independent of phenomenal relations, which would then just signal that it is 'there', or phenomenal relations are somewhat embedded within it. To attempt the foundationalist task of grounding knowledge in self-evident principles, it is sufficient (and perhaps not necessary) to suppose that there is something. To pursue the empiricism-inspired task of reconstructing the genesis of knowledge based on its anthropological or psychological functionality, it is instead necessary to advance some claims about how things really are, even if only concerning how men or minds actually are. For Herbart, the main threat to the Kantian program does not come from skepticism (as is the case for foundationalist thinking), since he assumes realism on a methodological level, but from mysticism, the *Schwärmerei* constantly thematized by Kant himself (Allouche-Pourcel 2010) as opposed to empirical, methodologically controlled knowledge. In short, Herbart's realism stems from an empiricism-inspired adjustment of critical philosophy's methodology.

Herbart's divergence with Kant lies, then, in Herbart's relying on an isomorphism between phenomena and real being. Namely, a mathematical isomorphism. The mathematical articulation of phenomena hints at an analogous articulation in being. Mathematical structures do have some ontological meaning. While in Kant the giving of the phenomenon logically only implies

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[3] That this dilemma is inherent in transcendental logic is shown by the fact that its clearest formulation comes from Husserl (1992: 195), a century and a half after the definition of transcendental idealism in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. See also Masi 2023: 391-394.

that there is a thing-in-itself, whose transcendent position is understood as a hypothetical presupposition of the transcendental perspective, in Herbart the articulation of phenomena *indirectly* means that the given is so-and-so determined in itself. Such a determination in itself is not the one proper to the phenomenon. The determination of the phenomenon refers to that in itself, that is, it maintains a structured proportionality with it. In other words, the phenomenon not only signals that there is a thing-in-itself (as in Kant) but translates its internal determinations according to a mathematical code. Herbart's other well-known motto, already announced in the early *Hauptpunkte der Metaphysik* («The more appearance, the more reference [*Hindeutung*] to being», in Herbart 1887: 187) expresses this crucial difference with Kant.

The indirect character of the semiotic relationship between phenomenal relations and being in itself is due to the fact the only way by which being gets determined by phenomenal relations is a negative one. The being that is given shows itself as an articulated resistance to articulated variations and differences in thought and experience. There are only so many variations our imagination can impose on phenomenal relations. There are only so many differences our experience can discover. Some junctures of the phenomenal given appear to remain constant among variations. This constancy expresses their actual being. This being is indeed determinable, even if only as a negatively factual response to the test of many conceptual variations in its description.

However, Herbart still saw his philosophical investigation as a transcendental investigation in the Kantian sense (Herbart 1887: 188). Specifically, Herbart agrees with Kant 1) in highlighting the negative reflective condition of all transcendental philosophy and thus in warning against *Schwärmerei* (see, e.g., Herbart 1890); 2) in assuming that all knowledge of an object is ultimately knowledge of a complex of relations (Herbart 1887: 179-185); 3) in assuming that, although the nature of our knowledge depends on conditions imposed by the relation the object has with us, with our peculiar cognitive structure, still that object is not produced by the ego: there is rather something transcendent, independent of mind, subjectivity and thought, which is initially given as external to the relation and somehow contributes to constituting the object internal to it (Herbart 1887: 186). The role of Herbartian transcendental philosophy is thus to perpetually arrange and rearrange the concepts through which being is described, defined, and imbued with meaning.

Herbart indeed discusses the issue of the *Bearbeitung der Begriffe* within his attempt at defining a coherent metaphilosophical account of tran-

scendental philosophy as a functionalist and empirically oriented treatment of concepts derived from the findings of the empirical sciences, while still maintaining that the same philosophy should encompass ontologically committing theories such as metaphysics (see, e.g., Guyer 2023). His *Lehrbuch zur Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Herbart 1993)[4] opens up with the best expression of this attempt.

The §1 of the *Lehrbuch* reads:

> Philosophy, or the treatment of concepts, is indeed necessary in all sciences, as far as they not only point to their objects factually, or provide prescriptions for their expedient treatment, but also aim to enable us to reflect on them, that is, to analyze that which is confused and appropriately interlink that which is isolated (29).

The treatment of concepts is a reflective practice applied to positive sciences. One can reflect on the conceptual contents of positive sciences in many ways. But since individual reflective practices know deviations and deficiencies «in correctness, precision, completeness, coherence, and direction toward specific aims» (30), a meta-reflection is needed on how to reflect on the concepts of a given science in the most correct way possible. This echoes Kant's theme of defining scientific objectivity to allow for a proper confrontation of individual opinions (Kant AA V: VIII-IX). However, Herbart does not see this reflective practice as consisting in explicating some synthetic-constitutive functions transversal to each individual psyche. Rather, he claims that it should start from each individual as a self-observer, attempting to bring balance and unity between inner and outer experience. Ultimately, philosophy aims at achieving a state of equilibrium and unity between these two different types of experience. In what sense, conversely, is the situation to be resolved both one of imbalance and disunity?

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[4] The *Lehrbuch* made Herbart's philosophy accessible to a wide audience. Through four editions published during Herbart's lifetime (1813, 1821, 1834, 1837), it outlined Herbart's philosophical system across three key domains – logic, practical philosophy, and metaphysics (for a general introduction to the work, see Henckmann 1993). Needing to communicate his ideas to a broad audience, Herbart was compelled to clarify some of his core doctrines and unify his diverse scientific and philosophical interests into a coherent system. This need for unification highlighted metaphilosophy's role as the catalyst for the public spreading of Herbart's functionalist, empirically oriented elaboration of the task of transcendental philosophy.

The initial situation generating the need for rigorous, methodical concept treatment is one where the claim to intersubjective identity implicitly advanced by any concept purporting to be scientific – its claim to objectivity – is *not* recognized by all subjects involved. Philosophy should then enable reflection within scientific practice by first establishing *what* we are all reflecting on. In other words, philosophy should enable reflection by constructing concepts as *objective* contents of thought. Conversely, a vague, defective concept requiring philosophical treatment would be just a 'notion', not univocally identified by all the subjects involved in the scientific practice. Herbart thus associates epistemic vagueness, pragmatic conflict, and an as yet undefined condition of imbalance between inner and outer experience.

After providing some examples of concepts cutting across various positive sciences and in need of philosophical treatment (such as 'cause-effect' and 'void'), in §3 Herbart writes that

> [...] philosophy, relating at the same time to outer and inner experience, produces within the sphere of general concepts a necessary arrangement and progression, and with this a connection among the fundamental thoughts of all sciences, through which not only is the overview of human knowledge made easier for everyone, but also their own knowledge is condensed, as it were, and raised to greater effectiveness (35).

An Enlightenment trace – which Herbart shares, in his own way, with the most diverse exponents of the philosophy of his time (e.g., Hegel and Bolzano, see Manca 2023: 61-69) – lies in his attention for the problematic association of philosophy, progress, and effective linguistic and didactic exposition. Good philosophy, in Herbart's perspective, implies good metaphilosophy: defining philosophy's unity means defining the scope of scientific concepts needing philosophical treatment, thus defining science's unity. In Herbart's case, however, such a unity is not systematically deduced and expounded starting from a self-evident fundamental principle, as occurs in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. Instead of a self-evident principle, the Herbartian empiricist finds conflicts of opinions.

The ultimate equilibrium between inner and outer experience thus corresponds to the ultimate determination of objectivity and agreement among all involved individuals – that is, the elision of the individual deviation characteristic of every individual intervention in the intersubjective enterprise of science. However, no single philosophical exposition can guarantee this kind of achievement since no single starting point of the exposition is guaranteed to be

the right one. Herbart's concept treatment does not stand at the beginning of 'Science', but after a plurality of sciences. It is not *first*, but *second* philosophy. Its internal divisions are functional, not systematically deduced: e.g., the general distinction between theoretical and practical philosophy depends on two corresponding types of a posteriori effectiveness that the elaboration of different concept groups can provide.

As a consequence, §4 establishes that no specific object can be defined for philosophy:

> Through the preceding overview of philosophy at least this much is gained: that our gaze has wandered in many directions. It must retain this mobility, such that reflection strikes every object directly as it presents itself; so that it thus strikes either objects of outer or inner experience [...] but does not on every occasion spring back upon itself, as if everything were wrapped up in the I. [...] Now since philosophy cannot be described through any object which would belong to it in particular, excluding others, but rather finds everywhere that where it encounters concepts, at the very least the logical task of separating and putting in order: therefore the only question remaining is whether it can be more precisely determined through the way in which it treats concepts. [...] First it is easy to see that it leaves it entirely to scholars of every class, and thus to the other sciences, to collect the given and historically verify the fact that it is given. [...] If any science delivers to philosophy a supposedly given which cannot subsist as a concept, i.e., as something [merely] conceived (*notum*, *notio*), then this is an error which, if it was not avoidable in advance, awaits its correction from philosophy. Then, however, at least the factual must be cleared up prior to the philosophical treatment, as far as it can be determined through observation. [...] To speak of an *intuitional philosophy* is a complete misuse of the word. There is no other philosophy than one which begins from reflection, i.e., from the apprehension of concepts. That expression indicates that there could be intuitions which would elude or withdraw from reflection. But thinking everywhere follows the intuition. Concepts, even when they undeniably stem from the given (like the concept of becoming), can nonetheless harbor errors by virtue of which they offer themselves to reflection for further upheaval. [...] Everything up to now first of all sums up in this: no sufficiently comprehensive explanation of philosophy in general can be provided, except by saying that *philosophy is the treatment of concepts* (49-50).

Any determination of an object for philosophy would coincide with a unilateral restriction of its movement. Hence, the equilibrium pursued in the treatment of concepts is dynamic: not the definitive configuration of a network of con-

cepts that should supposedly deliver the right access to scientific reflection, but a movement of synthesis between ever more comprehensive, ever more 'conceptual' (that is, ever better identified as thought contents), but always somewhat unilateral 'notions'.

This progressive movement starts from an asymmetry that now, with the reference to an impossible *Anschauungsphilosophie*, becomes evident. In §3, Herbart differentiates inner and outer experience as thematic objects, respectively, of philosophical psychology (or, in Herbart's terms, metaphysics of inner experience) and natural philosophy (or metaphysics of outer experience). What is given in inner experience should sustain an initial elaboration from observation to notion by empirical psychology, so that then philosophical psychology could take it from notion to concept. Consequently, the sought equilibrium between inner and outer experience should essentially translate into a determined configuration of the relationship between empirical psychology and natural sciences since the two types of experiences offer themselves to philosophical conceptual treatment only as outputs of the respective positive sciences.

And in fact, in an observation added to the second edition – where a previous version of the fourth edition's text of §4 composes §§1-4, that is the first chapter of the *Lehrbuch* in previous editions – Herbart states that, once the problematic Kantian concept of reason as a higher cognitive faculty, deputed among other things to philosophical knowledge, is set aside, «philosophy in fact does lie in all sciences, if they are what they should be» (47n). If positive sciences were developed in an optimal and error-free way, there would be no need to circumscribe a distinct philosophical doctrine, because within them optimal reflection and its consequences on the organization of knowledge would always be warranted. But – and here lies the asymmetry – «thinking always follows intuition». All concepts, to the extent that they come from the empirical sciences, retain an intuitive element.

Intuition, following Kant, is essentially *knowledge of the individual*, in the double sense that it makes individuals known and is the individual subject's first access to knowledge. Intuition gives concepts epistemic value; and yet, it is at the same time that which introduces the perpetual possibility of error, of individual deviation, into their very constitution. Intuition is also characterized psychologically as a primarily 'internal' experience (Waxman 2019: 210-213). This is not by whim, but to assign an essential place to the immediately given within the peculiar framework of transcendental knowledge (Farber

1949: 596-598). Thus, the notion of inner experience bears a heavier burden than that of external knowledge: it comprises not only a set of scientific notions, but also intuition and its constitutive function with respect to objects of knowledge. From this psychological coating of intuitive knowledge results the traditionally problematic link between psychology and transcendental knowledge (Kitcher 1990: 3-29). On the other hand, if the Herbartian *Bearbeitung* were to relinquish external or internal experience completely, it would also relinquish error and, with it, its *raison d'être*.

Herbartian philosophy now turns – remaining the same – into metaphysics, in the sense that

> metaphysics has no other task than to make thinkable those very concepts which experience forces upon it (269).

This is a version of the «critical metaphysics» which Kant hoped to institute after having discarded the possibility that traditional special metaphysics could qualify as science (Parrini 2011: 136). This is the sense of 'metaphysics' through which every scientific philosophy, however adherent to the objective results of the empirical sciences, gains its right not to be reduced to those same sciences, on pain of losing sight of the complex intersubjective operations that constitute their objectivity.

In Herbart's interpretation, critical metaphysics is essentially a theory of individual being as far as it becomes knowable and thinkable through its relations. That is, as far as it is given as a concept, or rather within an increasingly refined and integrated conceptual function. The reflection exercised on the concept allows this progressive integration. At the same time, each concept maintains an epistemic value, a relation with intuition. The integration between concepts is also the definition of new relations between individuals. Thus, as a reflective treatment of concepts, as their optimization for the purpose of further reflection, Herbart's metaphysical philosophy deals with the transcendental conditions of the conceptualization of individuals and relations.

3. Parrini and the «Herbartian component» of philosophy

Herbart's philosophy suggests an early alternative to the idealist development of the Kantian project. Given the profound influence Hegelian idealism had on the subsequent developments of European philosophy, there is reason to believe that some roots of the bifurcation between continental philosophy and an-

alytic philosophy – whose established beginning lies precisely in an explicit re-action to English neo-Hegelianism (Lebens 2017) – lie in the Herbartian post-Kantian deviation from idealism.

Giulio Preti was the first in Italy to draw and expound the awareness of the importance of Herbart, and of his reinterpretation of the Kantian project, from the works of George Edward Moore, one of the main actors in this reaction against Hegelianism. Today, the significance of Herbart's thought for the formation of an initial 'analytic opposition' to the continental tradition is a current historiographical topic (again, see Beiser 2022).

Parrini followed, as he himself recounts (Parrini 2004: 183), Preti's lectures on Moore (Preti 1986) in which Preti, a year before his death, shared with his students the then groundbreaking conviction that there was a Herbartian, and thus Kantian, component in the origins of analytic philosophy. One of Preti's last essays, later published posthumously, set out this conviction clearly and explicitly once more (Preti 1976). There are therefore also good reasons to suppose that an interest in the Herbartian deviation occupied a significant part of the last years of Preti's philosophical work, and that Parrini, Preti's teaching assistant since 1969, had taken on the task of deepening and developing the conceptual and historical implications of this deviation.

As Parrini himself admits introducing one of his major works (Parrini 1998: XIII), the need to explicate the connection between a certain conception of logical empiricism and Kantian philosophy constitutes in fact the main motivation behind his historiographical work. He consistently accompanies historiography with epistemology, believing that epistemology should be supported by historical knowledge (Parrini 1991). Then, one could argue that Parrini's interest in Herbartian philosophy also concerns a certain methodological attitude in doing epistemology. While this is most probably the case, a concrete argument for this thesis should consider Parrini's Herbart only within the thread of Parrini's multifaceted historiographical interests – a thread that goes from Kant at least to Reichenbach, Carnap and Quine. However, within the general frame of reference provided by the prospect of Herbart as a functionalist, anti-foundational, empiricist and (critically) realist Kantian, here it suffices to point out that Herbart is among Parrini's most persistent research interests – developing at least from Preti's 1971 lecture to the mentioned Parrini 2022.

It is convenient, then, to consider Parrini's uses of Herbart chronologically. It is appropriate to speak of *uses* in the plural because at least three

different functions exercised by the most significant mentions of Herbart in Parrini's works must be distinguished. The first function is the one we are focusing on: Herbart is invoked as a metaphilosopher. The second function is the one, already mentioned, inherited from Preti and of a more properly historiographic character: Herbart is invoked as the initiator of a style of philosophy alternative to that of classical idealism and influential, more or less implicitly, for the birth of analytic philosophy through the traceable influences of Herbart above all on Russell, Moore and Carnap. The third function is more strictly conceptual: Herbart is invoked as the first to point out the problem of empirically determined cognition in Kant, in its close connection with the possibility – rejected, accepted or re-elaborated in the long history of neo-Kantianism – of localization, 'contingentization' and in short of *naturalization* of the a priori constitutive structures explicated by transcendental knowledge.

These three levels of Parrini's reading of Herbart are not just juxtaposed. They are deeply intertwined. The importance of this intertwining becomes clear when trying to delimit our chronological window of interest. Parrini's first significant mention of Herbart can be found in Parrini 1994. Two previously historiographical studies, Parrini 1980 and Parrini 1983, do not contain relevant references to Herbart. In particular, one of the three essays comprising Parrini 1980, entitled *The origins of logical empiricism and the future of philosophy*, is evidently woven with the three broader themes related to the three uses of Herbart mentioned above: the metaphilosophical question, the one regarding the historical origins of analytic philosophy, and the one regarding the naturalization of Kantianism. However, Herbart is not mentioned. Still in a 1993 text on the continental origins of analytic philosophy, Parrini focuses on Reichenbach – who, together with Mach, Poincaré and Duhem, constitutes until that moment the set of continental sources of analytic philosophy considered by Parrini. On the other hand, we know Parrini is aware of Herbart's importance in this regard since the time of Preti's lectures. Hence, Parrini's interest in the aforementioned themes precedes the introduction of Herbart among Parrini's preferred conceptual figures.

They intertwine explicitly only from the mid-1990s, through the first explicit mention of the Herbartian 'deviation'. In Parrini 1994, the naturalization of Kantianism and the historical significance of Herbart are interwoven by a reference to § 150 of the *Lehrbuch*. Parrini quotes the following passage, here presented in his translation:

The fundamental question is not resolved by the [Kantian] system. One may

regard space and time, categories and ideas as conditions of experience lying in the mind. However, this does not explain the *determinacy* of each *individual* thing in appearance. *The mind holds ready, for all which is given, all and the same forms.* If one wants to leave it to each given to determine or select these forms appropriately *according to its kind*: then just *as many relations to our forms* must occur in the given as we find many determined figures, times, coherent properties of one thing, coherent causes and effects, etc. in experience. Now since the given (the matter of experience) is ultimately derived from the things-in-themselves, these latter obtain a just as great multiplicity of predicates as we perceive manifold determinations in appearance; against the Kantian proposition that we do not know about the things-in-themselves. But the incorrectness of this solution also reveals itself in that the most difficult point of inquiry is not touched on at all by it. *How* do we perceive the forms since we cannot demonstrate this perception either *in* or *outside* the matter of the given? That we do perceive them is very certain (see the first chapter of this section), but it still remains to be explained that we *must therefore* perceive a round figure here, a quadrangular figure there, *because* in the way in which the colored is given to us *certain* (not exhibited by Kant, but to be exhibited) *conditions* are contained. As in this example, so in the others. (Herbart 1993: 272)

This passage contains two questions that cut across Kantianism. The first question concerns the relationship between phenomenon and noumenon and the suspicion that the passivity that transcendental idealism, as opposed to speculative idealism, would like to preserve in relation to the constitution of the object of knowledge – which would make transcendental subjectivity, however perpetually operative, also structurally finite and localized – entails the implicit institution of a causal relationship between phenomenon and noumenon and thus a transcendent use of the category of causality. At this point, two alternatives emerge: either eliminate the phenomenon/noumenon distinction by collapsing the second term onto the first, or accept the structural character of their isomorphism (be it warranted by a causal relationship or any other kind of sufficiently structural relationship) and thus interpret the phenomenal level as an *articulated* expression of the noumenal level – hence collapsing the conditioned nature of the phenomenon onto the task of 'representing' the noumenon. In the first alternative, one can easily recognize the idealist-speculative solution to the problems of Kantianism. In the second alternative, we can now recognize Herbart's.

Parrini then pinpoints a central influence of this Herbartian solution on 20th-century analytic philosophy (Parrini 1994: 215-216). He notices how, through the complex history of post-Kantianism, the conviction that knowledge of the real is essentially knowledge of formal relations, i.e., expressible as parts of isomorphisms, then became a cardinal point, for example, of Moritz Schlick's epistemological proposal, while also bearing a considerable influence on Wittgenstein's thought (229n). The historical significance of Herbart's proposal, on this level, is clearly recognizable. However, this is not a peculiarly Herbartian influence. From Maimon to Trendelenburg we find ourselves here, as Parrini himself recognizes, in one of the classic *loci* of post-Kantian criticism.

The second question, which Herbart also recognizes as the more difficult one, concerns the relationship between form and matter. On this question Parrini writes:

> [...] One essential feature of Kant's conception, well reflected by the critical theory of truth, is the fact that the cognizant subject can be considered the "legislator of nature" only as regards the formal aspects of nature itself, and this in the precise sense that natural laws and synthetic a posteriori judgments in general, even while having to be compatible with synthetic a priori principles, are not derivable from them. Particular scientific concepts and laws depend on experience. In science there is an a priori part that constitutes the (critical) metaphysics of every science of nature, and an a posteriori part that constitutes its true and proper physics. The relations between these two parts are complex and it is not always easy to say where exactly Kant sets the border between them. It is certain, however, that natural science presupposes as much the formal, purely a priori components of knowledge, as those depending on experience (216-217).

It should be noted that Kant's uncertainty regarding the boundary between the pure and empirical parts of 'physics' (here to be understood as the science of nature in general) reflects not a negligence on Kant's part, but rather the dilemmatic oscillation that we have seen as characteristic of the act of balancing which is transcendental idealism. From the epistemic side of the dilemma, it is desirable for the transcendental idealist that the logical-transcendental architecture of physics would leave ample room for the empirical part of it, i.e. for the acquisition of true and proper knowledge – to which a certain modesty of transcendental idealism should correspond, an emphasis on the formal character of the formal unity synthesized a priori, and thus a unity that would config-

ure nature a priori merely as a complex of spatiotemporal individualities defined in relation to one another. This direction of the oscillation can be detected for example in §36 of the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Kant AA V: 318-320). The logical-transcendental side of the dilemma wants instead to push towards an enlargement of the pure part, and thus to put the emphasis on the aspect of unity of the formal unity synthesized a priori, to show that even the knowledge of the most complex phenomena of physics is susceptible to being grounded by transcendental reflection. The writings that make up the so-called *Opus postumum* are emblematic of such an ambition within our dilemma (e.g., AA XXII: 15-17). Parrini too, continuing to comment on this passage, speaks, in a different but related sense, of a dilemma:

> But when it is evaluated in the light of Herbart's second objection, just this dependence on the experience of 'determined' knowledge presents the critical-transcendental conception with a dilemma to which I see no solution. Let us suppose that the matter of knowledge is something completely... material, i.e., totally formless and structureless, a pure and simple determinable. On this basis, one can still hope to explain (barring other sorts of difficulties) the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments, or of justifying the validity of a set of universally and necessarily valid forms of knowledge of objects of experience. But then it becomes difficult to understand how a matter of knowledge totally devoid of inner connections and articulations can serve as a guide for the formation and formulation of the concepts and laws of empirical science. [...] Let us suppose now we attribute a certain 'form' to matter to take account of the role carried out by experience in the development of knowledge. Then, the question rises of the knowability. of this structure taken by itself (Herbart's first objection); and, above all, it becomes difficult to understand, despite the demonstrative efforts made by Kant in the Analytic, why experience cannot have some 'determinant' value on the supposed a priori parts of knowledge as well as on the a posteriori ones. And this is the most crucial point where the fortunes of Kantianism have ultimately come up, positively and negatively, against subsequent scientific developments and against the philosophical teachings that have been derived from them by 20th-century philosophy of science, starting with its Neo-empiricist strain. [...] Either matter is just a thoroughly undifferentiated manifold – in which case it remains unclear how it can assume a role in the constructs and in the choices the understanding makes in its free creative spontaneity; or, in harmony with what actual scientific knowledge seems to show, one credits sensible experience with some ability of determination – in which case it remains unclear how it is possible to limit a priori its range of determination to certain elements of the cognitive system by excluding others (217-218).

In the duality outlined by Parrini it is easy to recognize, once again, a declination of the now familiar dilemma. The side of matter as «a thoroughly undifferentiated manifold» is the side of the emphasis on the logical-transcendental constitution of the object of knowledge, the side that would like to enlarge the pure part of physics and is friendly to speculative idealism. The side that credits the matter of sensory experience with a certain internal determination, independent of the workings of transcendental subjectivity, is instead the side of a modest transcendental logic – the one chosen by Herbart and also by Parrini, given his emphasis on the greater concordance of this approach with positive scientific knowledge.

The point here, however, is not to take sides, but to recognize the knowledge of the individual as the endpoint not only of the question of the naturalization of Kantianism and that concerning Herbart's influence in the history of analytic philosophy, but also of the general question of metaphilosophy. As stated above, Herbart's metaphilosophy implies a metaphysical component: Herbart's notion of concept is committed to notions such as 'individual' and 'relation'. The problem of determinate knowledge instantiates the collapse of Kantian transcendental philosophy onto the knowledge of the individual. Then, Herbart's metaphilosophy can be conceived as the theory of philosophy resulting from the choice, in the face of this collapse, to assign to the concept the task of sustaining individual knowledge. From this choice, which reassigns a series of tasks traditionally reserved for intuition to the concept and its discursive dimension, blossoms a significant component of the genesis of the analytical tradition.

The matter of knowledge is its passive, local, contingent aspect. Since form is by definition knowable, attributing an internal form to matter means, as Parrini notes, attributing knowability to individual form, to the individual: to that which traditionally, from Plato onwards, tends to evade knowability as far as it is maximally contingent. If each individual is to present its knowable form, its individuality (or: its matter, its contingency) will be a determining element of this knowable form. Thus, the possibility arises for the permeation of form by contingency and a space for the plasticization and naturalization of form opens up.

This conceptual movement subtracts the monopoly of individual knowledge from intuition. Hence, it introduces a significant deviation in a traditional division of epistemic labor and paves the way for a different conception of philosophy, in which the alleged ineffability of individuals to discursive

thought is discarded. Here we are already at a metaphilosophical level. Anticipating analytic philosophy means, in this specific case, not only providing conceptual tools that will then be employed by it, but also presenting a concept of philosophy that is understood in a renewed way starting from these new conceptual tools.

The Herbartian deviation – by granting individuals a form which is correlated not to subject-related intuition but to the results of positive scientific knowledge – produces a new concept of 'concept'. This new concept is both a conceptual tool (as far as it is transformed from mental image to bearer of isomorphisms between appearance and reality), and an access to a different notion of philosophy. With the problems of intuition set aside, new problems correlated to a more ambitious notion of 'concept' open up, since the concept is now responsible for plastically sustaining the contingency of the individual, for maintaining identical reference to it despite 'it' being by definition something extremely localized, something that lends itself to knowledge in a radically occasional manner.

In short, then, Parrini traces in one of the points of leverage of the Herbartian critique of Kant – the transcendental foundation of empirically determined cognition or knowledge of the individual – one of the keys of the analytical research program. This is a key to be understood both in a historical sense, as evidenced by the Herbartian influence found in some key figures of early analytic philosophy, and in a conceptual sense. This conceptual sense becomes explicit at a metaphilosophical level based on a definition of philosophy whose meaning is closely correlated to the notion of concept at play.

I am referring, of course, to the Herbartian definition of philosophy as treatment of concepts, based precisely on an ambitious definition of what a concept is and thus directly correlated to definition of philosophy (or an important part of philosophy) as conceptual engineering – in the sense of the engineering-like adaptation of the concept to the difficult and changing demands presented by the process of acquiring knowledge about.

The programmatic connection between Herbartian treatment of concepts and conceptual engineering is explicitly stated by Parrini for the first time in the *Foreword* of Parrini 1998:

> The essential point is my conviction – supported precisely by the analysis of the problem of knowledge – that it is not possible to develop a comprehensive philosophical discourse whilst limiting ourselves to the mere analysis of language, of problems, or of concepts. As I maintain in the final pages of

> Chapter VII, with reference to Herbart, as well as the aspect of analysis, there must be an aspect of 'synthetic-rational reworking' (*Bearbeitung*), of 'conceptual engineering'. The 'synthetic' aspect consists in the proposal of a theoretical construction which is capable of partly modifying the initial concepts when this is necessary. This affects the structure and presentation of philosophical work, making the latter very close to the construction of scientific theories.

The Herbartian treatment of concepts is explicitly equated with a declination of conceptual engineering. The emphasis is on synthesis: conceptual engineering must be called upon where analysis is no longer enough, where the formation of new conceptual syntheses is required. In the body of the book, before Chapter VII, the problem of determinate knowledge reappears (113 ss.). In Chapter VII, Herbart's metaphilosophical program is presented again in relation to analytic philosophy, but this time as a possible corrective to the one-sidedness of the method of philosophical analysis: faced with the problems of cognition, mere analysis of concepts leaves us in aporias comparable to the internal contradictions that every concept, considered unilaterally and statically in the face of complex and shifting experience, had already revealed to Herbart's eyes (188). The key passage for the introduction of the theme of the *Bearbeitung* in Parrini's philosophy finally arrives a few pages later:

> Herbart maintained that philosophy can be considered neither Kantian 'rational knowledge by concepts', nor Fichtean *Wissenschaftslehre*. Rather, philosophy should be seen as a kind of 'conceptual elaboration'. The task of philosophy should not consist exclusively in the 'logical' work 'of separating and ordering concepts', that is, if we want, of *analyzing* concepts in order to make them somehow c1ear and distinct: the task of philosophy comprises also a kind of systematic integration of concepts, attained by 'reworking' them. [...] I am interested in defending Herbart's general idea that philosophy originates from the observation of aporias and difficulties inherent to certain notions and their reciprocal connections as they occur 'in experience, and in particular in the experience of common consciousness'. The task of philosophy is, in the first place, the c1arification of concepts, even in their problematic aspects, and, subsequently, their elaboration and integration in forms as coherent and systematic as possible (191).

These are conceptual forms, and yet not mere representations. Parrini is well aware that, going back to Herbart, he is invoking a notion of concept heterodox from the Kantian point of view, yet still Kantian. This means that the principle of unity of the coherent and systematic forms referred to is also a princi-

ple of objectivity as intersubjective agreement and resolution of conflicts be-
tween individual opinions. The emphasis on the synthetic character of the indi-
vidual constructions instituted by conceptual engineering is an emphasis on
the construction of a *community based on a shared objectivity*. Vice versa, the
end of constructing such a community sheds an ethical light on objectivity. The
pursuit of principles such as clarity, pluralism, modesty and balance, associated
with a rational practice of philosophy, is evidently functional to the institution
of this kind of rational epistemic community.

Parrini's program of using Herbart as the fulcrum of the intertwining
of the question of individual knowledge with the origin of an important part of
the analytic tradition and with the delineation of a program of conceptual engi-
neering appears clearly outlined in Parrini 2004. Here Parrini gives a Kantian
accent to the synthetic-reconstructive task characteristic of Herbartian concep-
tual engineering, highlighting how it is aimed resolving the conflicts generated
by conceptual vagueness as an obstacle to constructive confrontation between
individual opinions. He then connects the Herbartian *Bearbeitung* to Carnapi-
an conceptual explication and, significantly, to Quinean metaphilosophy. The
reference of the problem of knowledge of individuals broadens here into a
more general issue regarding the ontological implications of conceptual engi-
neering thus understood. Parrini writes:

> [...] it is a matter [in Quine] of carrying out an analysis-reconstruction of our
> discourse in such a way: (I) as to clarify what it means to commit oneself
> ontologically, that is, what exactly recognizing the existence of certain entities
> equates to [...]; (II) to limit as much as possible the ontological commitments of
> reformulated theories taking into account, as far as possible, our ontological
> desires or scruples [...]. And also in this case the work of
> analysis/reconstruction is to be conceived as the development of a real
> ontology which can make descriptive claims about reality that are not different,
> in principle, from those recognizable in the best scientific theories (Parrini
> 2004: 287).

The attribution to the concept not only of the epistemic task of representing an
extension, but above all also of the logical task of making individuals thinkable
entails that conceptual engineering is always also engaged with the world in-
habited by the engineer-philosopher: a world more or less rich in individuals,
for example including only spatiotemporal individualities or also some abstract
objects (as is inevitably the world of the physicist: see 287n).

Starting in the 2010s, Parrini's Herbartian program clearly expresses an ethical component. A metaphilosophical essay in Parrini 2011 contains one of the most evocative self-descriptions of Parrini's philosophical ethos:

> According to my version of the 'Herbartian' conception, philosophy is an activity aimed above all at analyzing the discrepancies and aporias that can be found in the 'cobweb' of concepts and beliefs in which (often without thematizing such concepts and beliefs) we find ourselves entangled. Once the analysis is complete, philosophy carries out a re-elaboration aimed at restoring those notions to us in clarified form and obtaining a conceptual system as adequate and coherent as possible with respect to the available data deemed unproblematic at the moment. [...] Philosophy, like science, is a practice that self-corrects by relying on itself: it moves from beliefs that at the moment seem to be acceptable to evaluate other beliefs empirically and rationally in a virtually infinite process. This is why elsewhere I have argued that the famous saying "If God is dead, everything is permitted" can be sensibly contrasted with the evocative words of a poet: "If there is no God on earth, then we [human beings] will be the Gods". Understood in this way, philosophy renounces any absolute foundation of knowledge and morality. [...] We thus find ourselves facing a broad quasi-circular process, but one that aspires to be quasi-circular *in a virtuous way*. (Parrini 2011: 166-167)[5].

Metaphilosophy and the ethics of philosophy – if not the ethics of knowledge in general – are intertwined in Parrini's lucid acceptance of the absence of transcendent foundations for the epistemic enterprise, intended as the (practical and existentially relevant) enterprise of orienting oneself towards things and others through knowledge. However, Herbartian conceptual engineering is not a defective task, so to speak, of more or less insufficient remedy for an irreparably lacking condition. It is a task – to use a term dear to Parrini – essentially *positive*, that is of positioning, correcting and adapting a web of beliefs

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[5] Here Parrini refers to the epigraph of *Knowledge and Reality*: «Will kein Gott auf Erden sein, sind wir selber Götter!», which he translates as «If there is no God on earth, then we are Gods ourselves!». These are words taken from Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* (1827), specifically the song *Mut* (*Courage*). The addition in square brackets is by Parrini himself. The rarity of such lyrical outbursts in Parrini's philosophical prose gives this passage particular meaning. Conversely, this passage sheds some, albeit indirect, light on the fundamental ethical tension in Parrini's epistemology. A similar, and equally indirect, light is shed on Parrini's work for example by Wolters 2011.

and concepts to inhabit while minimizing, as much as possible, conflicts trace-able to motivations pertinent to contexts and epistemic ends.

At this point, the treatment of concepts also becomes an ethical task. Indeed, the reasons for emphasizing its synthetic-reconstructive moment com-pared to the analytical one are primarily ethical: since the network of concepts within which we operate is also a constitutive part of the world of individuals and relations we inhabit, the possibility of producing good reconstructive re-sults depends on the ability of the treatment of concepts to make our world more livable, to contribute to rationally resolving the conflicts of opinion that perpetually populate it.

In subsequent metaphilosophical writings – imbued, among other things, with a thematic interest in the teaching of philosophy – the reference to Herbart is not only explicit, not only programmatic, but relevant for the way Parrini presents and recapitulates his own philosophical path.

In a brief metaphilosophical work with a markedly anti-specialistic tone (Parrini 2018), a chapter dedicated to the Herbartian program – placed right after another chapter dedicated to Carnapian explication – provides the reader with one of the most general and comprehensive self-representation of Parrini's philosophical method. Moreover, as can be seen in the list of writings drafted by Parrini himself[6], a modified version of the title of the 'self-representative' essay I quoted above (Parrini 2022), shows a markedly Car-napian-Herbartian character: *Explication and Re-elaboration of Concepts*. «Re-elaboration of concepts» could easily be translated as *Bearbeitung der Be-griffe*. If the title that then appears in the essay, published posthumously, de-parts slightly in tone from the Herbartian letter, it approaches Herbartianism even more incisively in spirit: *Explication and Rational Reconstruction*. The ethos of the Herbartian conceptual engineer is essentially, centrally synthetic-reconstructive. In any case, the first paragraph of this essay – «The Herbartian metaphysics» – remains, indeed, explicitly Herbartian. In it one finds all the Herbartian themes explored so far:

> Reacting both to the bombastic claims of the German idealistic philosophies of the first half of the 19th-century and to the primacy of intuition, Herbart defends a more sober conception of speculative activity. Philosophy is set in motion by the "disquiet" generated by the various deficiencies that afflict our

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[6] The list is freely available here: https://www.academia.edu/43279988/List_of_Publications.

concepts and aims to produce their "quieting". Its starting point is constituted by the "forms of experience" at the basis of our conceptualizations. While affirming the great methodological value of the skeptical attitude, Herbart believes the investigation must move from the "firm recognition" [...] that the forms are "given for every single sensible object in a manner proper to it, determinate". [...] The difficulties arise from the fact "that concepts are imposed on us by experience" which, because of their criticality, "cannot be thought", so that it becomes impossible for us to "preserve the given" as it "recurs". [...] Precisely because "the given cannot be discarded", but neither can it be fully thought, "it is necessary that we elaborate it in thought", subjecting it to a necessary transformation that consists in a twofold work of "correction and integration" of our concepts and principles. In such a "transformation of thought" lies the "purpose of metaphysics". [...] For Herbart, that is, in the transformation of concepts one does not pass, as in logical deductions, from the identical to the identical; something "new" intervenes in it because, in addition to the "correction" of concepts, their "integration" into a single, compact whole is achieved (Parrini 2022: 68-70)[7].

4. A Kantian-Herbartian ethos for conceptual engineering

At this point, we are able to clearly see what is missing from Chalmers' definition of conceptual engineering: the synthetic-reconstructive moment. This moment is in fact not absorbed, despite Chalmers' constructive intentions, by the notion of «implementing». It is not absorbed because of its ethical nature. As Parrini, through Herbart, shows, taking seriously the anti-analytical moment of conceptual engineering – its impetus as a reaction against an analytic philosophy that is solely and completely analytical – means reassigning an ethical ambition to analytic philosophy.

The need for an ethical integration does not only apply to the current cultural condition of analytic philosophy. Parrini recalls how Moore was as disturbed by the idea of philosophy being exhausted in conceptual analysis as he was by the confusion generated by the idealism of McTaggart and Bradley (Parrini 2004: 285).

The Herbartian component present from the beginning within analytic philosophy, central to its development, thus emerges as a component of internal tension – a call to the insufficiency of mere philosophical analysis in the

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[7] The passages in quotation marks are drawn from Herbart's *Lehrbuch*.

face of the tasks traditionally attributed to philosophy, or at least to a philosophy that still wants to take Kant's perspective on the tasks of philosophy seriously.

The Herbartian ethos of conceptual engineering is a lever that Parrini has employed, from the mid-1990s to his last writings, to bring an important part of the analytic tradition – that proceeding from Carnap and Quine and continuing with Sellars – to the height of some of these Kantian tasks. Conversely, he more or less implicitly argues that it is essential to pursue those values traditionally claimed by the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition – clarity, pluralism, modesty, and balance – if one wants to keep the Kantian project up to date in a world becoming increasingly complex.

In discussing the history of analytic philosophy, its difference from the continental tradition, its merits and flaws, Parrini has these values in view, along with the question of what to do with them for contemporary philosophy. The cultural division between the two traditions is just an aspect of the cultural history with which we find ourselves operating as philosophy scholars today. Now that, as Parrini himself hoped[8], the divide seems to have disappeared or at least become much more nuanced (see, e.g., Baz 2017), given the changed socio-cultural conditions of philosophy, his pragmatic and value-centric way of understanding the metaphilosophical issue concerning the contrast between analytical and continental philosophy seems decidedly relevant.

The attention of the Herbartian conceptual engineer to the synthetic-reconstructive moment thus transforms into an ethos, into an ethical disposition. The fulcrum of this ethical disposition is the concept of synthesis as cutting across ontology, epistemology and ethics. By manipulating concepts, the conceptual engineer manipulates not only products of synthetic activities on a cognitive level, but also *publicly instituted meanings* – meanings that come together to compose a world of objects and values shared by a community. The conceptual engineer is involved in this community, engaged in its tensions and conflicts. A merely analytical point of view on their part, which would result solely in analysis, would produce either an unverifiable result or a result verifiable only according to an abstract and fictitious point of view external to the community. This is because the reintroduction of the engineered concept as a

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[8] See p. 4 of Parrini's short autobiographical presentation at
https://unifi.academia.edu/PaoloParrini/CurriculumVitae.

reconstruction of part of the world is the only way to verify the goodness of the engineering operation in question. In order to understand whether the conceptual engineer has actually improved a concept, they must bring it back to a sufficient level of unity so that it can be reimplemented in the needs and uses of the community that was already making use of it.

Here are the most significant features of this synthetic-reconstructive ethos as illustrated so far: functionalism of concepts, antifoundationalism of theory, posteriority with respect to the results of the positive sciences, search for the objective unity of concepts as resolution of conflicts between opinions, acceptance of the virtuous circularity characteristic of the process of conceptual engineering as the search for a reflective equilibrium between the demands of thought and the demands of experience.

To understand what a contemporary practice of conceptual engineering that programmatically tried to make these features its own might look like, let us reconsider the definition provided in Cappelen & Plunkett 2020. I described this characterization as generic. By this I do not mean that such genericity is in itself unjustified or erroneous. The authors are introducing a collection concerning a field of philosophical work that is still stabilizing and therefore still very fluid. By trying to do so in the most unprejudiced way possible, they inevitably fall into formulations that are to some extent generic.

However, it is interesting that one of the choices made by the Authors, one of the choices that passes the test of so much justified caution, is the presentation of a division between 'conceptual engineering' and 'ethics of concepts'. The Authors write that

> Broadly, conceptual ethics concerns a range of normative and evaluative issues about thought, talk, and representation. Those include issues about which concepts we should use, ways in which concepts can be defective, what we should mean by our words, and when we should refrain from using certain words. [...] [It deals with] normative issues about which concepts one should use (and why), and evaluative issues about which concepts are better than others (and why). Concepts can here be understood in rough terms as constituent components of thoughts, leaving it for different theorists to fill out that schematic characterization in different ways (4).

The possible connection between conceptual ethics and conceptual engineering is then hypothesized in the form by which the latter would be the concrete application of the normative elements contained in the former.

A first observation to make is that, while trying to avoid any commitment regarding the nature of concepts as «components of thought», the authors commit themselves to a conception of the use of concepts that presents this use as analogous, let's say, to the use of a teacup: the concept would be stored, static and available for use, somewhere, to be then used and finally be put away again. Its use would be clearly distinguishable from the definition of its meaning. It would be the application, in some sense, of this meaning.

The Kantian-Herbartian perspective, however, tells us that it is precisely the use of the concept that is the means of the genesis and continuous revision of its meaning. The concept used, evaluated by experience within scientific investigation, is the concept assessed for its potential (and eventually actualized) quasi-contradictory tension with the demands of experience. A tension that precisely pushes for its re-elaboration, for its engineering to make it a better tool for enabling thought regarding a given experience or class of experiences. A tension, therefore, that changes its meaning. In the Kantian-Herbartian perspective, the concept *is* its use to the extent that it is an ethically and epistemically relevant use, i.e., significantly involved in specific scientific practices.

Therefore, conceptual engineering cannot just be the applicative part of conceptual ethics. It is only possible to establish ethical standards for the use of concepts on the basis of the discoveries one makes during and through their use. In fact, since in this perspective the place of concrete ethical decisions about the use/meaning of concepts is the specific case of contradiction or quasi-contradiction that arises in employing a certain concept within a given scientific description or prediction of the dynamics of experience, the ethics of concepts – if it does not want to fall back into the abstractness of an a priori formal ethics – can only be a posteriori with respect to conceptual engineering. It is the way in which the conceptual and empirical materials respond that can provide, possibly, some norms for the future use of similar materials.

In short, if concepts are constitutive synthetic organizing focal points of empirical knowledge, rather than generic representations, one must give up any top-down approach to the normativization of concepts. The Authors themselves speak of a bottom-up approach when they follow the previous considerations with a collection of authors exemplifying what conceptual engineering is or could be: Rudolf Carnap, Sally Haslanger, Peter Railton, Matti Eklund and Kevin Scharp.

An integration of the Kantian-Herbartian ethos into the contemporary mainstream notion of conceptual engineering could take the form of transforming the (appropriate) mention of Carnap into the mention of 'Herbart & Carnap' as a historically and conceptually correlated duo, thus adding to the reference to Carnapian conceptual explication (focused on «vagueness and indeterminacy», but above all with «theoretical virtues» in view) a reference to the Herbartian treatment of concepts – which not only anticipates Carnap's attention to vagueness, but enriches it with a Kantian spirit (on the Kant-Carnap relationship, see Westphal 2015). Moreover, recognizing the ethical dimension of the conceptual engineering tradition from Herbart to Quine through Carnap would make it more easily integrable with the work of the other authors mentioned as paradigmatic cases of conceptual engineers, reducing the impression that Herbart is a somewhat out of place, somewhat outdated guest at a banquet of critical philosophers.

5. Conclusion

In Herbart, the metaphilosophical issue is closely intertwined with his interpretation of Kantianism. Through this interpretation, Herbart offers a representation of his own philosophical proposal as a realist and empirically oriented Kantianism with a functionalist and anti-foundationalist method.

Parrini inherits his long-standing interest in Herbart from Preti. He begins discussing it in the context of his research on the Kantian legacy in contemporary epistemology. The discussion takes on a programmatic form once Herbartian metaphilosophy, connected to the problem of determinate empirical knowledge within the Kantian transcendental logic, shows itself as an alternative possibility not only to the speculative interpretation of Kant (a possibility then reactivated by the thinkers who established the tradition of analytic philosophy), but also an alternative within analytic philosophy to the reduction of philosophy to conceptual analysis.

The attention to the synthetic-reconstructive moment characteristic of Herbart's proposal for conceptual engineering becomes the fulcrum of a methodological program explicitly adopted by Parrini in his most mature work, culminating in representing his philosophical position primarily through it. The Herbartian theme, from relatively underground as it was, thus becomes one of the most significant gateways to Parrini's thought – and, at the same

time, a significant testimony to how Parrini's thought can be relevant for contemporary practices of conceptual engineering.

It seems perfectly fitting to me, therefore, that the editors of the *Festschrift* dedicated to Parrini on the occasion of his retirement from teaching (Lanfredini & Peruzzi 2011) chose of this markedly Herbartian (and Parrinian) passage as the epigraph to the collection:

> What I see standing at the origin of the philosophers' task are anomalies and aporias present in undisclosed form within the web of concepts, beliefs and natural or cultural circumstance in which we are enmeshed. As for the problem of knowledge in particular, its difficulties arise from such undisclosed aporias in notions such as truth, objectivity and rationality and their connection in turn with the overall progress of science. But philosophy cannot be confined to linguistic or conceptual analysis of such a historically changing web. Beyond analysis – though analysis remains indispensable – there lies the project of rational synthetic reconstruction through proposing a theoretical viewpoint from which those notions which form the point of departure can be unraveled, and unified or modified as required. Thus I do not consider philosophical problems as due mainly to the abuse of language or the distorted use of common expressions. Rather philosophy deals chiefly with substantive conceptual (and cultural) tensions which demand theoretically relevant answers, not different in kind from the answers looked for in science.

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