It is an honor to comment on the article by Athanasios Raftopoulos;¹ his knowledge is impressive, the arguments sharp and the conclusions right (in my view) – Raftopoulos is a master of his trade. Consequently, my little disagreements here and there would not be of much interest. Instead of developing these in detail, I would like to pose a metaphilosophical question, hoping that his response will enlighten us on the larger image within which this article is situated.

Reading the article, but also our earlier cooperation (Müller 2005; Raftopoulos and Müller 2006a; 2006b), I always have some qualms on a metaphilosophical level: What kind of work is the author doing here? According to my own very traditional analytic training, primarily as a student of Wolfgang Künne (Künne 1983; 2003), philosophers do conceptual analysis, while the other disciplines do empirical work (with the exception of the formal disciplines). Of course, this understanding was attacked in Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” and related works by Putnam (e.g. Putnam 1975), but we remained with the view that there are some analytic and synthetic truths. We did get used to

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¹ Athanasios Raftopoulos

References:

Hume 1748: XII. Of the academical or sceptical Philosophy - Part III, p. 165

Künne 1983; 2003

Müller 2005

Raftopoulos and Müller 2006a; 2006b

Putnam 1975
the idea that empirical knowledge influences traditional philosophical concerns, especially in epistemology and the philosophy of mind, and we did not mind – “How the cognitive sciences inform philosophy”, as Raftopoulos puts it in his recent book title. A good philosopher must know their facts, their empirical facts, when he or she is doing work in a particular area. Raftopoulos says, in the first sentence of his paper already that “the empirical sciences can contribute to the analysis of philosophical issues”. I could not agree more. In our particular case the problem of cognitive penetrability of perception is an empirical problem. It is precisely the kind of problem about which philosophers have speculated and speculated until there is an empirical solution.

In present day philosophy, I see a fashion that uses empirical facts (data) to support positions that are not philosophical but empirical in nature (often showing off many empirical details). The argumentative structure is classical philosophy, saying that ‘this has to be that way because …’ where the ‘this’ refers to some empirical state of affairs. This kind of philosophy speculates about empirical facts in areas where we do not yet know the facts – the arguments are a priori, supported by a posteriori data. This is precisely what the speculative philosophy of German Idealism was doing, e.g. in the works of Schelling or Hegel. Of course, the empirical basis of Schelling was a lot weaker than that of Fodor or Raftopoulos, but the arguments are of the same sort. Schelling was the editor of a journal called “Spekulative Physik”, but what would we say today about a journal called “Speculative Cognitive Science”? The empirical speculative approach may take its support from the collapse of the analytic-synthetic distinction, but precisely that collapse also undermines the approach. If it is right (and I think it is) that when we do conceptual analysis we have to take into account the empirical knowledge, then it is also right that some future empirical discoveries may affect present conceptual speculation. Something that is clearly a truth that is proven a priori may turn out to be false tomorrow – even if we did our work today with exceptional case and with the required technical knowledge.

At this point, we face two questions: First, whether the speculative philosophy is truly problematic and, second, whether Raftopoulos is actually guilty of the crime. As concerns the second, it seems to me that the move from empirical knowledge to empirical speculative philosophy is located in the transition from the first section of our paper to the second. Let us see some examples: “Is there cognitive penetration of perception?” “Is there semantic vision?” “If perception comes from the mind, does this lead us to perceptual skepticism?”. It seems to me that only the last of these questions is suitable to philosophical analysis. This does not mean that philosophers cannot contribute to empirical issues like the first two. It seems to me, however, that our contribution must be of the kind “what
is the case if this sentence is true?” (for example, what does “semantic” mean?). This is a helping job, but it is our job. I am not trying to say that this kind of speculative philosophy is actually psychology under a different name. The name is not the issue. It is not important whether the speculation is done by psychologists, philosophers or people who are both.

Finally, I would like to admit that there are exceptions. In exceedingly rare cases we can give a negative answer to such issues through a priori thinking; saying, for example, “thought cannot be computation since computation is purely formal”. This is not only a very rare occasion, but also typically not the end of the discussion, since the opponents will differentiate their position (“what we mean by computation is not purely formal, but …”). In some cases we might also be lucky to have empirical facts that are sufficiently clear cut such that the issue is resolve after the conceptual work is done; in the final section of a philosophical article. If, however, this final section is the first and starts by saying that “I believe things must be as follows…” would we then not do better to follow Hume’s advice and commit it to the flames?


