

Before Critique: H el ene Metzger (1886–1944)

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Current developments such as 'new materialism', 'neo-vitalism' and 'eco(philo)sophy' demonstrate that 'non-reductive Continental naturalism' is on the rise in the arts and the human sciences (cf. Mullarkey, 2003: 64). The scholarship here assembled makes an effort to genuinely put into action Donna Haraway's 1988 analysis of empiricist totalization and social constructivist relativism as non-exhaustively dichotomous. This epistemological diagnosis refers us to an unusual suspect: H el ene Metzger, a prolific writer and an active participant in the inter-war community of historians of science in France whom we have 'forgotten'. Metzger found herself surrounded with the logical positivism of the Wiener Kreis, on the one hand, and the historicism of her French colleagues, on the other, as well as by the infiltration of the history of science by a 'chronological empiricism' (Metzger, 1987 [1937]: 58).¹ Metzger did not feel at home in all these traditions, yet she demonstrated that a simple opposition to them would not have the desired effect of qualitatively shifting the academic landscape.

Non-reductive Continental naturalism does not plea for the reduction of culture to nature. Such physicalism or crude materialism appears as compliant with the exact sciences and not with their so-called soft counterpart. Nevertheless, critical neo-disciplines within the arts and the human sciences have for a long time also been predicated on a nature-culture split. Since the naturalization of women and other Others has led to their exclusion from subjectivity, women's and gender studies, queer studies, and ethnic and postcolonial studies developed a reduction of nature to culture. We have to acknowledge that this disciplinary boundary work can only be affirmed when a classificatory logic, based in C.P. Snow's famous thesis of the 'Two Cultures', guides us. Metzger's work helps us not to fall in the trap of negation or classification.

Next to publishing book-length histories of several natural science disciplines, Metzger gave lectures to members of her community and published review pieces. Philosophical reflection featured prominently in these talks and reviews that were, by implication, quite unconventional. By zooming in on the conceptual work of Metzger, I do not intend to approach this part of Metzger's oeuvre as a historical curiosity (Chimisso, 2001: 238; Mora Abad a, 2008: 197). Metzger herself was fiercely against picturesque histories and she was quite explicit about the importance of philosophical method in the history of science (Metzger 1987 [1937]). Apart from that, making Metzger into a rarity would repeat the processes of perpetual gendering that her career fell prey to. After all, Metzger never became professor or even got a lectureship (Chimisso and Freudenthal, 2003). However, focussing on her philosophical work produces a take on Metzger that is itself slightly unorthodox. While Cristina Chimisso (2001) has extensively researched the past French debates about the history of science (should we write 'total histories', thus looking at the extra-academic too, or should we write 'histories of mentalities', thus trying to enter the mindset of the scientists of the past?) and ultimately stresses Metzger's ambiguous contribution to both of the traditions mentioned, I lift her out of this discussion about methodology and place her in a more conceptual realm.

¹ All translations of Metzger are mine. The texts discussed in this paper have been published in H. Metzger (1987) *La m ethode philosophique en histoire des sciences: Textes 1914–1939*. Ed. G. Freudenthal. Corpus des Oeuvres de Philosophie en Langue Fran aise. Fayard.

The way in which Metzger responded to both the logical positivism developed a 1.000+ kilometres away from Paris and her colleagues in the history of science that worked nearby can demonstrate why and how philosophy was so important for her. Since the *Centre de Synthèse*, for whose Histories of Science Unit Metzger served as a secretary, was 'to promote historical knowledge along the lines of a rather positivistic conception of history' (Chimisso, 2001: 212), Metzger can be said to have been an 'outsider within' that context; as much as she argued against the rise of the Wiener Kreis in epistemology, she argued against the state of the art in the historical profession. Metzger was unhappy with what we now call the Whig-historical take on mentalities, prominently put forward by her uncle, the historian of philosophy Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and popular amongst her French colleagues. If we were to start with Metzger's take on the Wiener Kreis, whose viewpoints had suddenly come to dominate the 1935 *Congrès international de philosophie scientifique* held in Paris, we immediately encounter the courage with which Metzger approached colleagues and their (implicit) epistemologies. Metzger's key question about the 'absolute positivism' or 'complete empiricism' of the Wiener Kreis was about its claim to newness (Metzger, 1987 [1935]: 166). Ascribing 'an exuberance and a juvenile aggression' to the style of the logical positivists (Metzger, 1987 [1936]: 55), Metzger confirms that, on a conceptual level,

[...] what is worrying is that the members of the Vienna School, for the first time, believe that their Viennese insights are philosophical commonplaces. Also worrying is that the members of the Vienna School who are fighting the *a priori* with all their might, nevertheless keep one in place at the basis of their work; it is the systematic ignorance, first spontaneously, then required, of the original philosophical works, of the history of philosophy and the history of science. This *a priori* and naïve ignorance make it very difficult to come to a fair judgment [...]. (Metzger, 1987 [1935]: 166)

The important conceptual aspect of this quotation is the non-exhaustive opposition that is claimed to exist between the Kantian synthetic *a priori*, fought by the members of the Wiener Kreis, and the *a priori* of the latter, based on their continuing separation of thought from thinker as per which thought becomes a thing that is to be treated logically (Metzger, 1987 [1935]: 167) and their consequential, yet unacknowledged re-affirmation of what we now call a disembodied Subject.

Historian of science and Jewish thought Gad Freudenthal (1990) has linked Metzger's manner of reasoning employed vis-à-vis logical positivism to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer (2004 [1989]: 277) explicitly stated that the Enlightenment attempt at undoing prejudice from research installs itself a prejudice, stemming mainly from his insight that '*[t]o be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete*' (Gadamer, 2004 [1989]: 301; emphasis in original). In other words, the so-called Subject is never fully known to itself and should therefore not be presupposed, which is indeed reconcilable with Metzger's affirmation that, while constantly searching for a deepened understanding of the past, the historian tries to

[...] penetrate with greater certainty and more active sympathy the creative thinking of the past in which he infuses new life, that he revives for a moment. Moreover, there is a personal, subjective factor [...] which is impossible to eliminate completely; it is better to admit it honestly than to deny it *a priori*. Historians, like all philosophers, like all scientists and like all humans have innate tendencies, individual, but imperceptible ways of thinking that are themselves not yet opinions or even systems of thought, but that can and do engender such opinions and systems. (Metzger, 1987 [1933]: 11)

Unwilling to separate thought from thinker and thus considering the thinker along embodied lines, the historian, according to Metzger, 'tries to find or recreate, for a moment in itself, the forces underlying the works that are the object of his meditation' (Metzger, 1987 [1933]: 11). Not only does this install an *a priori* that is completely different from Kant and the Wiener Kreis, but also are we looking at an immanent appreciation of what scholars, including historians of science, do. This *a priori* manifests itself 'in the procedures of the advancement of thinking itself' (Metzger 1987 [1936]: 49).

In line with her affirmation of the embodied subject that is never self-same, Metzger embraced the active role of what she labelled 'the *a priori* of expansive thought' in an attempt to qualitatively shift the equally naïve historicism of the school of the mentalities that she found herself surrounded with both in the history of science (Lévy-Bruhl and his followers) and in history in general (think of the Annales School that had also just come up). Metzger did not easily conform to the study of the mentality of an era, a programme that came with the assertion of a *primitive* mentality. Metzger simply claimed about the latter that such illogical, spontaneous thought is still at work and produces the most wonderful (scholarly) discoveries (Chimisso, 2000: 50). Metzger

[...] call[ed] *expansive* thinking that which rushes noisily and simultaneously in all directions where it can cut a path, which will constantly and irregularly go ahead without taking a moment to contemplate with a glance the terrain covered, and without attempting to build a doctrinal monument! (Metzger 1987 [1936]: 47; emphasis in original)

In conjunction with her rejection of the primitive mentality, Metzger also refused the sudden leap from non-reflective, expansive thought to reflective thought that she connects to the figure of René Descartes. Making fun of his schismic argument about the fact that 'mentally speaking, we pass from the state of child to the state of adult' (Metzger 1987 [1936]: 51-2), Metzger only wanted to go as far as confirming that there is rather continuity and back-and-forth movement between the two ways of thinking. This organic unity is further strengthened when Metzger compares 'human intelligence [with] the eye of certain deep water fishes, which is at the same time organ of vision and source of light, if it prevents its own clarity it will quickly become blind' (Metzger 1987 [1936]: 56).

In sum, the 1930s context of Metzger existed, first of all, of the anti-Kantian members of the Wiener Kreis that propagated the impossibility of a synthetic *a priori* and attempted to restrict knowledge theory to the analytic *a priori* (knowledge based in logical reasoning) and the synthetic *a posteriori* (experienced-based knowledge). Metzger made explicit how this framework, established through oppositional argumentation, was far from new and did nothing but reintroduce the disembodied knower, historian and philosopher. Secondly, the historicist alternative was uncovered as being infused with positivism. Metzger claimed that the chronological empiricism that was the foundation of the work of her French colleagues was not verifiable, because the primitive mentality that modern scientists had supposedly overcome was, according to Metzger, still around us and very productive in fact. She refuted the historian's claim to disembodiment and made spontaneous thought into an important building block for thinking about thinking as well as making discoveries. What Metzger proposed is a thoroughly reworked *a priori*: the *a priori* of expansive thought. I propose to condense this label and to call her *a priori* a 'creative' one. This creative *a priori* is both a rethinking of the *a priori* discussion then and now and a tool with which the *a priori* of any *a priori* can be studied. The concept of the creative *a priori* is to capture and keep alive the complex onto-epistemological moves made in Metzger's least-known work. 'Creative *a priori*' is shorthand for

active sympathy, individual but imperceptible ways of thinking and expansive thought.

The *a priori* has for long been suffocating in defining epistemological divides such as rationalism/idealism vs. empiricism/realism. The greatest thinkers of the Western philosophical canon have been involved with the question of the *a priori*: Hume and Kant, for that matter, and later Quine, whose legacy still dominates analytic philosophy in particular. Most of these thinkers have dealt with *a priori* knowledge and with the context of justification. If we look at one of the first studies of naturalization as the prohibition to enter, precisely, the realm of knowledge and its justification, we find that Genevieve Lloyd (1993 [1984]) emphasizes the Cartesianism of all of these positions and their impossibility to answer to the questions provoked by the 'sexless soul' and its own embodiment as well as its impact on embodied Others. Lloyd asks "[w]hat must be the relationship between minds and bodies for it to be possible for the symbolic content of *man* and *woman* to feed into the formation of our sense of ourselves as male or female?" (Lloyd, 1993 [1984]: xii; original emphasis) so as to affirm that the Spinozist alternative to Cartesianism qualitatively shifts our understanding of what it means to think, giving the body priority over the mind and extending to the context of discovery. Metzger's creative *a priori* should be positioned in this tradition as she made the forceful claim to

[...] not speak about the quarrel about innate ideas, not about the opposition of rationalism and empiricism, not about the constantly recurring dispute about idealism and realism, not about the Kantian critique, not about the evolutionary hypotheses, not about causality, time, space, [...] we do not talk about the many theories of scientific knowledge (Metzger, 1987 [1936]: 42).

Just like Metzger's proposition to *study* instead of presuppose epistemological positions, Lloyd comes to the conclusion that "Descartes's alignment between the Reason–non–Reason and mind–body distinctions brought with it the notion of a distinctive kind of rational thought as a *highly restricted* activity" (Lloyd, 1993 [1984]: 46; emphasis added). When presuppositions about rationality are made, we will never reach the *expansive creativity* that Metzger considers key to scholarly activity, past and present. So whereas Descartes wished "to remove all obstacles to the natural operations of the mind" (Lloyd, 1993 [1984]: 44), "Spinoza, reacting against the passivity or Descartes's version of Reason, [...] ma[de] Reason an active, emotional force" (Lloyd, 1993 [1984]: 51), just like Metzger proposed as basis for histories of science. I propose to think along these lines when discussing critique in the 21st-century humanities.

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