e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 1 – Num. 1 – June 2020

States of Possibility. Meinong's Theory of Dispositions and the Epistemology of Education

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Abstract The article deals with Alexius Meinong's concept of disposition and its role in education. It introduces the newly translated text *General Remarks on the Theory of Dispositions* and contextualises this late work by Meinong. Taking the lead from Meinong's definition of disposition as *Zweckkönnen*, the underlying assumptions are presented and put into the context of the German discourse on *Bildung*. The remarks of Eduard Martinak are taken into account as a point of reference, since they directly address Meinong's theory in the context of pedagogy. Finally, it is asked how the idea of forming dispositions might contribute to a historical epistemology of education.

Keywords Education. Pedagogy. History. Philosophy. Psychology. Dispositions. Possibility. Habits. Bildung. Meinong.

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Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted	2020-08-27
Accepted	2020-09-09
Published	2020-06-30

Open access

Citation Freyberg, S. (2020). "States of Possibility. Meinong's Theory of Dispositions and the Epistemology of Education". *JoLMA. The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts*, 1(1), 127-144.

> If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education.
>
> (John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*)

1 Introduction

An introduction to the context and translation of Alexius Meinong's (1853-1920) "General Remarks on the Theory of Dispositions" (1919)[1] might best locate this text and its concern historically in its wider cultural background and systematically in the question of how education is possible. In this way the intricate relation of generality, phenomenological observation, logical procedure and particular orientation towards application as well as the language used in this work will probably become more transparent. The issue of possibility reminds us of metaphysical implications and presuppositions as well as orientation and actions to an end. While learning seems a matter of praxis, culture and cultural politics, as a cognitive process it also poses more general if not fundamental questions.

In philosophy today, Meinong is known as a member of the 'Brentano school' of philosophy and descriptive psychology (Smith 1994). Usually he is referred to in connection with his *Gegenstandstheorie*, a 'theory of objects', that takes into account all kinds of existing and non-existing, incomplete and higher-order intentional phenomena. His theory was greeted as well as opposed, for example by Bertrand Russell.[2] In his famous "On denoting" (1905a) Russell used Meinong's concept of "non-existing" and "incomplete objects" as a contrast foil. To some, this treatment seems like the major contribution of Meinong's work to the formation of analytical philosophy, while the theory itself "is dead, buried and not going to be resurrected" (Ryle 1972, 7), even though there are still points worth discussing as productive or at least provocative statements. While the

This article stems from the project *EarlyModernCosmology*, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (GA n. 725883).

1 In the following the text is referred to in the German versions as (D) quoting both the original publication in the *Festschrift* for Martinak edited by Meinong (ed. 1919, 33-54) and the republished version in Meinong's collected works (1978, 289-310). There is not much literature on Meinong's theory of dispositions. For a discussion from the perspective of analytical ontology and descriptive psychology see Mulligan (2003).

2 Russell reviewed two works by Meinong (Russell 1899) and his group (Russell 1905b) and discussed the onto-logic of Meinong's *Gegenstandstheorie* in his famous article "On denoting" (Russell 1905a).

interest in Meinong, his work and his legacy began to grow with the interest in the history of analytical philosophy and its connection to Husserlian phenomenology, it is the history of pedagogical concepts which will provide the orientation here. Since a commentary on Meinong's theory of dispositions from an analytical point of view (Mulligan 2003) already exists, the following text will take another route and discuss the context and explicit aim of Meinong's outline for a theory of disposition.[3]

2 The Context of Meinong's Theory

While studying history, economy and philosophy at the University of Vienna, Meinong encountered Franz Brentano and became his student and colleague. He turned from his historical interests towards philosophy and published studies on Hume, emphasising the relational aspects of Hume's psychology. For some years he was a lecturer in philosophy in Vienna before he was called to the university of Graz in 1882 (becoming full professor in 1889) continuing to work there until his death.[4] In Graz he became a famous university teacher, the founder of an early laboratory for experimental psychology and the 'founding father' of what has come to be known as *Grazer Schule*, bringing together philosophical and psychological concerns in an empirically minded and application-oriented way. Among his students were known philosophers, psychologists and educators (like Christian von Ehrenfels, Stephan Witasek and Eduard Martinak) many of whom later received influential positions contributing to the emerging Gestalt psychology and to educational reform (Reicher 2001). Another particular field the *Grazer Schule* contributed to was philosophical propaedeutics, both for school and university teaching. Around 1900 changes in teachers education of the Austro-Hungarian Empire made pedagogy an obligatory subject which now formed as an academic discipline. This context provided Meinong and some of his students with the occasions for intervention and basic research (see Meinong 1921, 9).

Meinong's theory of dispositions became influential already long before he wrote the text (D), which was supposed to give an outline and some comments on the concept of dispositions. As Meinong points out in the beginning of his text, his remarks are based on older reflections in works like *Über Möglichkeit und Wahrscheinlichkeit* (On

3 This text is now made available in translation for the first time (see this Journal issue).

4 For a short introduction to Meinong's life and work see Marek 2008-2019. Meinong himself gave a concise overview and introduction to his work as well as those of his former students in the first volume of *Deutsche Philosophie der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen* shortly before his death (Meinong 1921).

Possibility and Probability) (1915). Since Meinong used the idea of disposition already in his lectures, some of his colleagues and students took this concept up and used it in their own work (Höfler 1897; Martinak 1900). Thus Meinong's idea of disposition was presented for the first time in the works of other researchers and educators, such as his former student Eduard Martinak (1859-1943), who was to become an important figure in the Austrian educational system.[5] Martinak used Meinong's idea of disposition in his arguments against the frequent use of exams and marks, which he famously presented in his "Psychologische Untersuchungen über Prüfen und Klassifizieren" (Psychological Inquiries on Examining and Classifying) (see Martinak 1900).[6] On the basis of the concept of disposition, which emphasises the aim of *Bildung*, Martinak proposed a more balanced approach giving the motivational aspects of teaching more attention.

It is on the occasion of the *Festschrift* for Martinak in 1919 (when Martinak had joined the ministry of education) that Meinong wrote his "General Remarks on the Theory of Disposition".

3 Disposition in Education

Dispositions are discussed today in terms of realism and ontological accounts (Kistler, Gnassounou 2007), which make no principal distinction between things, organisms or humans. While Meinong's theory of objects is to a great extent in line with these endeavours, in his "General Remarks" he is interested in dispositions mainly in relation to the psychology and epistemology of education. Although Meinong develops his idea of dispositions in relation with his general theory, the basic concern of his text is given by the pedagogical context mentioned above. This becomes clear in the very first and last sentences. Meinong begins with a general statement:

> All education, in the broadest sense of the word, is directed towards the future. (D 33/289)

5 Eduard Martinak (1859-1943) first worked as a teacher (Gymnasiallehrer) and school rector before turning to the field of philosophical propaedeutics, which brought him into contact with Meinong. He did his *Habilitation* in 1887 and became professor for philosophy and pedagogy at the University of Graz in 1904 (full professor for pedagogy in 1909). Martinak is known for his efforts in educational reform first in the Austro-Hungarian context and later in the Austrian republic. Between 1918-1921 he led the reform department at the Ministry of Education implementing the social democratic school reform of Otto Glöckel, first Minister of Education in the first Austrian republic.

6 Martinak's works on the psychology of language (1898) and semasiology (1901) are influenced by Meinong as well, but remain almost forgotten (see Knobloch 1986 for a positive evaluation from a linguistic and semiotic perspective).

At the end of his "General Remarks" Meinong expresses his hope that his outline of a theory of dispositions can provide a concrete contribution to "the progress of research in the psychological and educational fields" (D 54/310). For Meinong the concern with dispositions emerges from the genuine interest of every educator: to educate. But what does this mean?

> The aim is always to endow the future life of the person to be educated with values. (D 33/289)

These values are of a certain kind and cannot merely be superimposed on the subjects.

Meinong hints with these remarks towards his theory of values, which he tries to connect with his more general "theory of objects", which he saw as a new and genuine philosophical, if not scientific, discipline (Meinong 1921). For a reader not initiated to Meinong's terminology, it is often difficult to understand his often complicated and cumbersome formulations. In the background of Meinong's argument, as he himself states, are more general considerations and the attempt to coordinate the theory of dispositions with other parts of his ontology. With some parts he introduces slight changes, while with others he remains somewhat undecided, as in the case of the ontological status of properties (Mulligan 2003, 199). However, it is more important how Meinong relates to the actual problem of education, the aim of which he formulates like this:

> [E]ducation aims at values, or more precisely at objects of value, which are to form part of the future life of the person to be educated. (D 33/289)

Since the educator cannot foresee all the situations in the life of the subjects, these "objects of value" have to be general and permanent, otherwise they would not help the educated person in his later life.

Now Meinong faces the problem of what exactly has to be formed in order to endow these values. It must be something which is relatively permanent or provides a certain continuity. Meinong approaches this question via a wide concept of experience. Experiences, he postulates, form the basis of every theory of disposition (D 43/299), even though an experience is always particular.[7] Given that, as Meinong states, *all learning is based on experiences*, how can we

7 "Den Ausgangspunkt aller Dispositionsbetrachtung macht, wie wir gesehen haben, ein Erlebnis aus, dieses Wort so weit verstanden, daß darin neben den inneren oder psychischen Erlebnissen auch die äußeren oder physischen den Erlebnisse einbegriffen sind" (D 43/299).

claim a more general, permanent or even universal meaning for it? If somebody learns an instrument, we want the student to actually master the instrument and not only to repeat the lessons.

It is in this way that Meinong touches on the time-honoured problem of conceptual development or what has been called the learning paradox, which was first presented in Plato's Socratic dialogue *Meno* from the perspective of the inquiring subject.[8] How can we explore new knowledge or master an unforeseen situation with the capacities we actually have at this point?

Meinong's answer to what makes the learning experience more general and permanent lies in his theory of dispositions. Since "all educational influence seems to have to amount to equipping the educated with relatively lasting qualities", it is not a particular experience or a certain kind of knowledge, which has to be addressed in principle. Rather education has to aim at "creating the aptitude for certain experiences" (D 33/289). Obviously, experiences, just like 'objects' and 'values' have to be taken in a broad sense, for, as Meinong claims, all kinds of knowledge and know-how are based on experience. Meinong makes the elliptical statement that "one cannot instil experiences in anybody" (D 33/289), which has to be understood as linked to the time dependence of learning and the unforeseeable form of particular future situations. Meinong uses the example of death: we cannot really make clear what it will mean for the individual to die, but we can form its ability to cope with the situation. In this way it becomes clear what Meinong means when he speaks about the basic concern of education as forming "the ability to have experiences, to make them one's own, to form them in an appropriate way, etc." (D 33/289). For Meinong this "ability" then guarantees a certain kind of permanence and it makes possible to use some experiences, i.e. learning or training, in a more general way.

> In this sense, the concept of capacity [*Fähigkeit*], ability [*Vermögen*] or, as one is accustomed to say with as little prejudice as possible, 'disposition' [*Disposition*] proves one of, if not the, fundamental concept of all pedagogy. (D 33-34/289-290)

While the theory of dispositions is part of Meinong's more general theory (Mulligan 2003), his aim is to understand dispositions both

8 Meno asks Socrates: "And how will you enquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of enquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?". Socrates rephrases the question in the following way, stating that a "man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire" (Meno, 80e-d; translated by B. Jowitt).

in their 'transcendental' function and their formability, which concerns the psychology of learning as well as the sense and states of possibility inherent in the process.

4 Meinong's Conception and its Elements

In order to achieve such a theory of disposition, Meinong first presents its basic concept (§ The Idea of Disposition) by asking: how can we attribute a disposition?

It is here that a general principle of Meinong's method stands out, namely the combination of observation and linguistic exploration. We observe but, at the same time, language as something like a reservoir of experiences or "a repository of tradition" (McDowell 1994, 126) guides our observation. That is why Meinong often includes considerations of ordinary language use in his analyses, while pointing to possible and probable conceptual antinomies. Meinong's answer is neither 'nativist' nor purely 'empiricist', while acknowledging arguments of both sides, but is based on something like a relational theory based on the idea of intentionality, which was a common ground for the 'Brentano School'. In his conception Meinong emphasises the relationships of phenomena and meta-phenomena, that is to say, he works out a network of psychological states, processes and underlying or supporting aspects.

The first problem for Meinong is to consider dispositions in terms of causes as "partial cause of the effect". If we ascribe, e.g. "artistic taste" (D 34/290) to somebody, Meinong argues, we will often see the disposition for such taste as a "partial cause" and dispositions therefore would have to be characterised as "derived causal concepts" (D 35/290). However, what is addressed in this way is not a disposition, but an ability, whereas a disposition is, for Meinong, what makes an ability possible:

> [T]hat which enables me, i.e. gives me an ability, I am not easily able to refer to as an ability. (D 35/291)

This distinction is important, because in this way it becomes clear that, for Meinong, dispositions cannot only be grasped in terms of causality. They cannot be reduced to naturalistic aspects. To make this point stronger, Meinong refers to his own myopia arguing that the abnormal shape of his eyeball is a characteristic on which his disposition of myopia is based, but cannot be called the disposition itself. Meinong remains vague on this point when trying to come up with a positive proposition. If disposition is an "underlying property" (D 35/290), it is not yet distinguishable from what we can call a predisposition in a more causal or naturalistic sense. But this is the

way his argument unfolds: by further distinctions and examples to come ever closer to something like a definition, which he then looks at from different sides.

Meinong calls the foundational properties, often referred to as disposition or predisposition, the "base" [*Grundlage*] of a disposition, as in the case of the misshaped eyeball. He points out that it is not the disposition itself and that physical as well as mental features play a role and are interconnected. Properties like the "base", the actualisation, aim-directedness or end, which he calls "correlate" [*Korrelat*], and the trigger or "stimulant" [*Erreger*] of a disposition have always to be considered in mutual relationship to each other and the disposition. Accordingly, Meinong first defines disposition tentatively as *Zweckmöglichkeit* (D 37/293), the possibility of achieving an aim. It is important to note that the definition of disposition starts from this consideration, which characterises it as what in other works on modal theory he called *Untertatsächlichkeit*, i.e. a state of possibility between the factual [*Tatsächlichkeit*] and the non-factual [*Untatsächlichkeit*] (see Poser 1972). If possibility is brought more concretely in relation with an aim and the ability to achieve it, it might get the character of a disposition. Meinong's concept of possibility already connects it with a certain kind of directedness and regularity. Possibilities are attributes of state of affairs, bound to them in particular way. He calls this connecting aspect "inhesiveness". The possibility is not merely fictitious but already bound or connected to state of affairs or features of regularity, which Meinong calls "objectives". These have to be understood as state of affairs in a very broad sense (Poser 1972, 189). However, possibility is still in need of a further determination to be seen as a disposition. As Meinong states, there always is a vehicle of possibility, which is an "incomplete object" existing in a "complete object". This "complete object" in the case of disposition is the subject or the "representant of disposition" (43-44/299-300). Although possibility is defined by its "inhesive" relation to an "objective", it is further determined by the actual properties and orientation of a subject. Attributing dispositions is based on the observation of their actualisation by *actions*.

While Meinong acknowledges the many facets and the importance of dispositional expressions, and considers alternative terms (like power, capacity, etc.), he nevertheless is convinced of the concept of disposition and tries to come up with a more precise definition. He achieves this by considering the circumstances of experiences.

Some favourable features of a situation might bring about a result of an action, which could lead one to attribute a certain disposition to the agent or subject. Meinong calls these features calls "supplements of possibility" *(Möglichkeits-Supplemente*) (D 38, 294). Since circumstances are accidental, they do not suffice for Meinong to characterise a disposition. Meinongs elaboration on this aspect proceeds in two

directions. At the one hand it shows that the term disposition is referring to something which can become a means to end for a subject. It is neither mere knowledge nor simply a know-how, but what makes them possible. On the other hand, as has been hinted at, meinong tries to avoid a premature limitation of possibility by denying that dispostion can be identified with a purely naturalistic property. In order to make this more transparent he introduces the conceptual elements of his theory. What he aims at is a definition which makes clear that dispositions should be attributed to the possibility of using an ability even in unfavourable circumstances. Meinong now provides the definition: "Disposition is insupplementary end-capacity" (D 40/296).

A disposition is what makes a capacity concretely possible to be actualised, even under unfavourable circumstances. There is no need for further supplements to support the possibility of actualisation (so it is "insuplemmentary"). The term "end-capacity" emphasises the orientation towards a goal, which, as has been shown before, for Meinong, is always somehow implied in the concept of disposition as the possibility of achieving an aim.

After Meinong has presented the basic definition of disposition, he turns to particular aspects and consequences (§ Moments of Disposition). He considers 1) correlate, 2) trigger or stimulant, 3) base and 4) aspects of formation. The first three points consider the interrelations in terms of an increase and decrease, while the last point is concerned with the actual formation of a disposition.

For our purpose it is not necessary to go through all the stages and distinctions of Meinong's theory of dispositions. The text proceeds by distinguishing elements and subtly analysing dependencies and other relations involved in the form and function of dispositions. The philosophical style is a combination of descriptive psychology and analytical ontology with some considerations of attribution and language use. Since the point here is to take Meinong's aim to contribute to a pedagogical theory seriously, we have to turn to his discussion of habits, training and suggestions.

As we have seen, dispositions do not only make abilities possible, they can be formed somehow and this formation in terms of *Bildung* is what educators have to achieve.

In the very last part of his article, Meinong finally gives some hints towards formation. They are based on the concept of habit. If disposition does not only concern those properties, which may be given by the constitution of the subject (base) and is always in relation to achievement or the possibility of actualisation (correlate), they form a field of possible formation. Formation is not only physically or mentally but also practically conditioned, and thus can be trained or at least stimulated or 'suggested'. Accordingly, Meinong distinguishes between "dispositions of habituation" and "dispositions of suggestion" (D 49/305), describing two ways of disposition formation (*Dispositionsbildung*).

When we become accustomed to something, dispositions are transformed and new dispositions may arise. They are "brought about or founded by experiences [...] that are correlates i.e. actualisations of the antecedent dispositions.[...] The change in the first disposition is the foundation of a new disposition and the cause of this foundation is the trigger of the first disposition" (Mulligan 2003, 205, see D 50/306). This process may involve an *increase* (when the typist gets used to a new type-writer) or a *decrease* of disposition (e.g. when we got used to a smell).[9] The latter involves passive and the former active experiences, which provide the possibility of being trained. Both kinds of experiences may involve increase or decrease, but in different ways. The fact that active experiences can be trained involves the possibility of an indirect relation, as when somebody is being trained to look for specific situations, which may be favourable to a certain outcome. Since Meinong subscribes to the ephemeral nature of mental states, passive as well as active, inner as well as external experiences involve fatigue, just like actions (D 50/306). While we can recover from the fatigue of training, "repetition of passive experiences simply dulls, the strength of the relevant disposition decreases" (Mulligan 2003, 206). We get used to this passive experience and instead of an actualisation of the particular disposition decrease sets in and may result in boredom or ignorance. Active experience involves apprehension, epistemic seeing and action, while passive experience is rather sensational.

The second way of forming dispositions is formation by suggestion, which is also more passive. It can best be understood as influence, e.g. when the way somebody speaks is influenced by a local dialect. Here a certain manner or style is "suggested" to the subject, which "actualizes a disposition whose correlates resemble utterances he has heard in the past" (Mulligan 2003, 206; see D 50/306).

5 Bildung as Emancipation

It follows from the above that the argument of disposition for pedagogical purposes points towards the active experiences in learning. Martinak (1900) had already presented a version of the idea of disposition in the context of pedagogy, and pointed out that the frequent testing of students may hinder active experiences and the motivation for learning. When he gave his talk in front of an assembly of educators, everybody in the audience understood that this would mean to fail the task of *Bildung*. The significance of this concept as an ideal in German culture in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century cannot

9 Mulligan explains: "Habituation is therefore a decrease in a disposition and what decreases is the experience of its correlate" (2003, 205).

be overestimated. In English it is translated as 'education', but etymologically it is connected to the verb *bilden* (forming) and the noun *Bild* (image), hence closer to the sense of 'formation'. It expresses a concept that refers to processes of cultivation of human capacities.

However the most important aspect of this concept is its fundamentally *emancipative purpose. Bildung* is deeply connected with German classicist ideas of emancipation. This connection forms the basis of seminal university reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt. The aim of *Bildung* for Humboldt was not to train people for a particular profession but to build up the abilities of an emancipated subject. This could make it possible to cope with different societal demands and may have different professions in life (Humboldt 2017). The subject of education should become able to use the symbolic and material means not of one particular field, but to understand the structure of the means itself, to cope with different unforeseeable situations. It is obvious that this resonates with the emancipative intentions inherent in Meinong's and Martinak's idea of disposition.

While Martinak defined "disposition" as "a state of possibility", Meinong made further distinctions, but both agree that it means an enduring possibility to perform a task. A younger compatriot of Martinak and Meinong, namely Robert Musil,[10] who did his doctoral work in philosophy and psychology under Carl Stumpf, explores in his novel *The Man Without Qualities* the other side of the ideal by describing the floating space of possibilities in modernity. His account supports the idea of disposition from a different side, but at the same time makes wider cultural implications visible, since possibility also involves the unreal, the never-to-be-realised. However, "[i]f there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility" (Musil 1996, 10), not as an illusionary world, but as exploring and appropriating the layers of reality.

What Musil calls "the sense of possibility" forms a core element of the ideal of *Bildung*. This ideal as grounding Meinong's theory of disposition was shared by most intellectuals of the time. This and other common backgrounds have to be ignored if one wants to argue, like Barry Smith (1994) did, that the 'Brentano school' forms a particular "Austrian philosophy" in contrast to "German philosophy". While it is understandable that from a perspective of Anglophone analytical philosophy this particular genealogy is emphasised, it is nevertheless historically as well as systematically wrong and rather counter-productive. It does not only ignore the agent's view (see Marek

10 It is not too arbitrary to mention Musil here. Not only was he a kind of heir as a student of experimental psychology and philosophy, he was also a witness to and a novelist of the decline and end of the Austro-Hungarian State. Meinong, in his autobiographical presentation, felt compelled to devote the last pages to his melancholy about the outcome of the war, sensing the end of an entire epoch and its legacy (Meinong 1921).

2008-2019), but establishes the distinction along the lines of a sober, rational 'Austrian' and an irrational 'German' tradition.[11] Furthermore, it ignores the main direction of German academic philosophy of the time, namely neo-Kantianism, which also subscribed to the ideal of a rational "philosophy as science" (Köhnke 1991).

If we want to understand the background and context of the idea of disposition as developed by Meinong, it is of particular importance to see the entanglements of different directions in germanophone philosophy, not the least to acknowledge the common heritage in German classicism and philosophy (see Schnädelbach 1984). Lacking in centralised public means and bourgeois power (not to speak of democratic institutions), around 1800 the German-speaking countries were fashioned by their concerned intelligentsia as the place of revolution in thought, an ideal place of reflection with particular affinity to the pluralism of ancient Greece, destined to inaugurate a bottom-up movement and transformation of minds. In general, the development of the intellectual culture in the German-speaking countries is deeply connected to the idea of education, and in particular to the concept of education as a means of emancipation. Beginning with the emergence of standard high German (codified only much later in the nineteenth century), which has its roots in the Protestant attempts of a more direct relation to the Bible by way of vernacularisation, this story shows the inner connections of 'reformation', 'education' and 'emancipation'. At the same time, it makes the conservative and sometimes regressive undercurrents visible, e.g. if the holy word is internalised, brought into the inner self not for liberation but for a more effective submission. In any case, German (to speak of it as such is as tentative as to speak e.g. of standard Italian) became not only the language of poets and engineers, of thinkers and functionaries, but it also became the language of educators.[12]

While the twentieth century saw the fall of this ideal, its active destruction and perversion (dismissing a truly democratic education), it was very alive in Meinong's time. In a way it is the 'sense of possibility' that Meinong tackled throughout his work, culminating in his modal theory of existing and non-existing objects.

Meinong's remarks on disposition on the one hand present the high level of elaboration achieved at the time, but it also makes clear that it can become a problem as a "split of rationality" (Engler, Renn

11 In this way the narrative suggests a straight line of development leading to Nazism, thus surpassing even the claims of Lukacs' critique of German Romanticism and philosophy of life in his *The Destruction of Reason*.

12 The tragedy involved in the destruction and neglect of this ideal and its emancipative function is unbearably deepened when considering the hopes and continued efforts invested in it by Middle and Eastern European Jewry and its descendants since the time of Enlightenment.

2018). Seen from a historical point of view, the text confronts us with the problem of rationality itself. Thus, it was not the lack of rationality in philosophy but the lack of coordination between different ways of thinking which led to the decline of German philosophy and the "German mandarins" (Ringer 1969).

The problem of Meinong's theory in relation with its professed aims is the language it is presented in, which often seems to reify what actually is functional and relational in order to give a more formal account. In this way the relation of phenomena and meta-phenomena does not become clear as a full correlative interdependence (Cassirer 1910, 451). However, the text gives an example of the level of differentiation which, for better or worse, can be reached by reflecting philosophically on basic concepts and presuppositions and professes a deep concern with emancipative ideals.

6 Outlook on a Historical Epistemology of Education

In the perspective of a history and philosophy of education, Meinong's theory of disposition and its context may nevertheless provide relevant suggestions, in particular to a still largely unwritten historical epistemology of education. This does not only concern a step beyond a history of education concentrated on institutional settings and curricula towards a psychohistory of education, but it also points to the need of systematically connecting ontogenesis and history.

When we take Meinong's account of the network of aspects connected with dispositions, we can follow the lead of his conceptual distinctions to uncover the historical conditions of forming specific capacities and orientations. Each system of education (in the broadest sense) brought about certain dispositions which are not restricted to the contents of learning. These dispositions can be analysed considering their context, their social and societal functions as well as their role in an "evolution of knowledge" (Renn 2020). Dispositions formed in Medieval scholastic universities may differ fundamentally from those in Humboldt's reform universities (or they may not). With the theory of disposition at hand we can begin to ask further about the actual practice of education and the epistemic values and "epistemic virtues" (Daston, Galison 2007) 'trained' or 'suggested'.

Meinong's concept of disposition and its distinctions may easily be connected with concepts already known in the field of historical epistemology. This is most obvious in the account of scientific training that Ludwik Fleck provided (1979). What Fleck calls the initiation into the "thought style" of a scientific "thought collective" pertaining also to basic perceptual levels may be understood as the formation of a disposition for the ability to have the relevant experiences in relation with certain research questions. Again, it is not only text-

book knowledge and not mere mimetic know-how, but the ability to explore in relevant directions, which is crucial.

Thomas S. Kuhn provides another possible connection and example as to the relevance of dispositions. In his famous account of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1996), where he partly builds upon Fleck's conception, he points out that certain models or 'paradigms' provide the foundation for a scientific community to be in agreement about the basic problems under investigation, as well as about the directions and methods of the discipline. This includes the education of future researchers, study programs and textbooks. However, the paradigms of the scientific communities are always in relation to expectations of future outcome. The basis of science thus includes a "futurology" (Omodeo 2019, 5-6).

> Paradigm debates are not really about relative problem-solving ability, though for good reasons they are usually couched in those terms. Instead, the issue is which paradigm should in the future guide research on problems many of which neither competitor can yet claim to resolve completely. A decision between alternative ways of practicing science is called for, and in the circumstances that decision must be based less on past achievement than on future promise. (Kuhn 1996, 157-8)

Michel Foucault stresses this strategic aspect of forming dispositions and thus shaping further development in his concept of dispositive (2001, 300). With the term *dispositif* Foucault denotes a system of power relations constituted by heterogeneous elements of 'discourse', institutions and knowledge structures. A *dispositif* as a complex network and historically changing system of knowledge may 'train', 'suggest' or even force subjects to adapt certain dispositions, 'default settings' and orientations, thus shaping individual and sociopolitical development. What Meinong describes in terms of an idealistic view of education, Foucault tries to uncover as based on more or less hidden constrains and structural regulations. Although an emancipative attitude is common to both, but it can be said that Foucault describes a situation where the ideal of *Bildung* has become doubtful.[13] Since the term *dispositif* remains a rather vague notion in Foucault, forming more of a question, it could be specified as a network of depending elements in further description amending the structural view with a more agents based perspective.

Apart from these connections there is another important point of contact with historical epistemology, namely in terms of a long-term

13 In this sense Foucault continues a Nietzschean critique of the actual praxis of education as a kind of drill.

history of systems of knowledge (Damerow, Lefèvre 1994), which connects cognition and history, micro- and macrostructures. The actual process of learning in a concrete situation always proceeds with the help of tools, symbolic representations and the guiding advice of teachers and peers. When reflecting on the means and epistemic structure of learning, new applications are made possible. In this way it becomes obvious that what is learned is not just mere convention of using epistemic tools, but the cognitive structures implicit in the possible actions with them. If a symbol represents possible actions (or manipulations), it is therefore not just a static entity, but something to be explored in its further possibilities. A disposition for learning thus may be defined as the relatively autonomous exploration of the implication of symbol systems and knowledge structures. In this way it becomes effective in bringing about change, realising "what could as well be otherwise" (Musil 1996, 11).

In philosophy this is a well-known attitude, since philosophy itself, as Alfred North Whitehead stated, can be seen as "a survey of possibilities and their comparison with actualities" (Whitehead 1967, 98). In 1927 Scott Buchanan, a former student of Whitehead, wrote about the increase of the degree of possibility in modern life worlds, creating "a scene of many possible worlds with all degrees and kinds of value claiming our consideration" (Buchanan 1927, 3). The answer to this challenge for Buchanan was to consider possibility in a philosophical contemplation, not unlike Musil and his protagonist. Kant, in his role as university teacher, famously claimed that he actually never taught philosophy, but always tried to teach only *to philosophise*. Meinong would probably have added that this does not pertain to a technical vocabulary and a particular know-how, but basically concerns the forming of a disposition for philosophical experiences in order to explore possibilities even under unfavourable conditions.

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