

"A MAXIMUM IN ITS KIND". THE PROBLEM OF THE ABSOLUTE BETWEEN NOVALIS AND KANT*

"UNA MÁXIMA EN SU CLASE".
EL PROBLEMA DE LO ABSOLUTO ENTRE NOVALIS Y KANT

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RECIBIDO EL 22 DE ENERO DE 2019, APROBADO EL 12 DE AGOSTO DE 2019

ABSTRACT RESUMEN

The problem of the absolute, in its religious, political, aesthetic and/or philosophical scopes, is one of the fundamental propeller springs of 18th century thought, especially in Kant's time and until the period of German Idealism. This paper intends to approach the problem in its philosophical-aesthetic dimension and to discern how the problem of thinking or experiencing the absolute, in the form of philosophical systematicity, as it was legated by Kant and his generation, was one of the main theoretical questions received by a whole generation of young authors. In order to best demonstrate this, we chose the example of the poet and philosopher Novalis. Our objective is, therefore, to investigate how openly, or how negatively Novalis read Kant's proposition of the a priori and the critical edifice based upon it, and to render evident Novalis' negation of the possibility of experiencing the absolute but in an "infinite approximation". We also seek to suggest what could have been Kant's reply to the objections, namely, an anthropological reply that might have shown the full reach of Kant's conception of his critical edifice and his philosophical reflection, which might have displayed a new dimension of the reflection on the human in Kant, and thus might have partially exempted the philosopher from the reproaches of his younger readers. Finally, we want to present both Novalis' and Kant's (to a certain extent) surprisingly close conception of poetry as the key for the philosophical problem of the absolute.


El problema de lo absoluto, en sus ámbitos religioso, político, estético o filosófico, es uno de los impulsores fundamentales del pensamiento del siglo XVIII, especialmente en la época de Kant y hasta el período del idealismo alemán. Este artículo intenta abordar el problema en su dimensión filosófica-estética y discernir cómo el problema del pensar o experimentar lo absoluto, en forma de sistematización filosófica, tal como fue legado por Kant y su generación, fue una de las principales preguntas teóricas. recibida por toda una generación de jóvenes autores. Para demostrarlo mejor, he elegido el ejemplo del poeta y filósofo Novalis. El objetivo es, por lo tanto, investigar cuán abierta o negativamente Novalis leyó la proposición kantiana del a priori y el edificio crítico basado en él, y hacer evidente la negación de Novalis de la posibilidad de experimentar lo absoluto, excepto en una "aproximación infinita". También se busca sugerir cuál podría haber sido la respuesta de Kant a las objeciones, específicamente una respuesta antropológica que podría haber mostrado el alcance completo de la concepción kantiana de su edificio crítico y su reflexión filosófica, que podría haber mostrado una nueva dimensión de la reflexión sobre lo humano en Kant, y por lo tanto podría haber eximido parcialmente al filósofo de los reproches de sus lectores más jóvenes. Finalmente, se quiere presentar la concepción de la poesía de Novalis y de Kant (hasta cierto punto) sorprendentemente cercana, como la clave para el problema filosófico del absoluto.

KEY WORDS PALABRAS CLAVE

Novalis, Kant, absolute, a priori, poetry.

Novalis, Kant, absoluto, a priori, poesía.

* The project leading to this application has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 777786.

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I. Novalis, advocate and critic of Kant's philosophy

When in 1797 Novalis concludes his "Kant-Studien"¹ (NS 2: 385-394) by saying that "The whole Kantian method – the whole Kantian manner of philosophizing (...) is a *maximum in its kind*" (id.: 392)², the poet only seems to reaffirm the words of many of his contemporaries, who, regardless of their position towards Kant's philosophy, would agree with such a praise³.

To those authors, as to Novalis, Kant's philosophy was of *incontrovertible importance*⁴. According to Schelling, for instance, Kant had founded "a new mode of observation" (AS 3: 15) "by radically inverting the representation according to which the subject is passively receptive and tranquil, whereas the object is effective" (id.) – an inversion, Schelling

¹ The "Kant-Studien" were first published as a fragment in *Novalis: Schriften*. Kritische Neuausgabe auf Grund des handschriftlichen Nachlasses. Hrsg. von E. Heilborn, Berlin, 1901; as a whole, in *Novalis: Schriften*. Im Verein mit R. Samuel, hrsg. von Paul Kluckhohn. Nach den Handschriften ergänzte und neugeordnete Ausgabe. 4 Bde. Leipzig, 1929. The series of annotations were composed by Novalis in 1797, immediately after the so-called "Hemsterhuis-Studien", and both lectures reflect Novalis' two main philosophical concerns at the time: that of philosophy and that of poetry, their reciprocal connections and delimitations and their necessary transition from a Classicist approach to a Romanticist one.

² All citations, not only Kant's and Novalis', but also from other authors, will be presented in a traditional manner (Abbreviation of work, Volume of work, number of page(s)). The abbreviation of each work cited finds correspondence in the final bibliographical section. All citations have been translated from their original German language into English. All citations are of my own translation.

³ Not to say, of course, that Kant did not have many opposers; he did, perhaps even more than his advocates. But despite this concordance, or lack thereof, Kant was regarded even by his detractors as the author of a great philosophical edifice, one which would stand forever – as a *maximum* of its kind. See, on the adhesion and/or opposition to Kant's works, the multi-volume collection *Aetas Kantiana*, ed. Culture et Civilisation.

⁴ Novalis' approach of Kantian philosophy has been mostly neglected, as has been the whole of Novalis' philosophy, in detriment of his work as a novelist and a poet. As exceptions to this rule, with special focus in Novalis' concept of the absolute, we would refer the following: GRÄTZEL, Stephan; ULLMAIER, Johannes, "Der magische Transzendentalismus von Novalis", in *Kant-Studien*, Bd. 89, Heft 1, pp. 59-67, 1998; AMERIKS, Karl, "On the Extension of Kant's Elliptical Path in Hölderlin and Novalis" in *Kant's Elliptical Path*, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012; FRANK, Manfred, "«Intellektuelle Anschauung». Drei Stellungnahmen zu einem Deutungsversuch von Selbstbewusstsein: Kant, Fichte, Hölderlin/ Novalis", in *Die Aktualität der Frühromantik*. 23 Internationale Novalis-Bibliographie Bd. 3., hrsg. von Ernst Behler und Jochen Hörisch, Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich, pp. 96-126, 1987. HAERING, Theodor, *Novalis als Philosoph*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1954; KRÜGER, Manfred, *Novalis. Wege zu höherem Bewusstsein*, Stuttgart, Freies Geistesleben, 2008; SIMON, Heinrich, *Der magische Idealismus. Studien zur Philosophie des Novalis*. Heidelberg, 1906; WALLWITZ, Georg Graf von, "Über den Begriff des Absoluten bei Novalis", in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 71, pp. 421-436, 1997; NASSAR, Dalia, "Reality Through Illusion: Presenting the Absolute In Novalis", in *Idealistic Studies*: Vol. 36, Issue 1, pp. 27-45, 2006; MITTMANN, J.-P., "Vom sprachlichen Zugang zum Absoluten", in *Philosophische Rundschau* 44, pp. 64-73, 1997.

concludes, “which would extend to all branches of knowledge as if by means of an electrical effect” (ibid.)⁵. For a similar reason, *Hölderlin* too would consider Kant “the Moses” (StA 6.1: 304) of the German nation⁶. *J. I. Baggesen*, in turn, would compare Kant’s endeavor with that of Copernicus, and deem it a “hysteron proteron” (B 2: 175)⁷: for, according to the Danish poet, Kant’s philosophy was, even prior to its fulfilment, the *pinnacle avant la lettre of its kind* and of its procedure. And, likewise, Novalis’ previous position with regard to Kant does not seem to differ in the least from that of his peers; Novalis who, in his “Kant-Studien”, and not unrelated to Baggesen’s words, would even comment that “astronomy once thought the earth as fix and the sky as rotating around it” (NS 2: 391), whereas philosophy “had once thought the I as mobile and rotating around objects” (id.) – until at last the “revolutionaries of both sciences”, not by chance Kant and Copernicus, “inverted” (ibid.) such erroneous perspectives and consolidated them in their present state.

However, just as other young idealists, Novalis’ stance towards Kant’s philosophy is not just one of profound *reverence*, rather also one of *discord*; and curiously enough, in Novalis’ case, *discord with regard to that which seems to be the cause of reverence*. For, let it be noted, Novalis’ aforementioned citation is in fact longer, and not all in it is tacit accord. It reads as follows: “The whole Kantian method – the whole Kantian manner of philosophizing is one-sided, and one could perhaps, not with injustice, deem it scholasticism. Indeed, it is a maximum in its kind – one of the most singular phenomena of the human spirit” (NS 2: 392).

As such, the objective of the present article is to comment, as thoroughly as possible, on the citation above; in light of it, to ascertain to what extent Novalis praises, and yet opposes Kant’s philosophy, and to what extent *this simultaneous opposition and praise seem to be intertwined, and even intimately inter-dependent*, in the spirit of Kant’s young readers; and finally, to propose a possible (anthropological) Kantian reply to the objections raised: one which, if seen from the perspective of the problem

⁵ See Schelling’s text “Immanuel Kant”, in Schelling, F. W. J., *Ausgewählte Schriften*, hrsg. von Manfred Frank, Bd. 3., pp. 11-20.

⁶ See Hölderlin’s letter to his brother, on the 1st of January 1799, in Hölderlin, Friedrich, *Sämtliche Werke. Grosse Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, hrsg. von Friedrich Beissner, Bd. 6.1, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1954.

⁷ See Baggesen’s letter to Jacobi, on the 26th of April 1797, in Baggesen, Jens Immanuel, *Aus Jens Baggesen’s Briefwechsel mit Karl Leonhard Reinhold und Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, in zwei Theilen, 2.Th., Leipzig, F. A. Brockhaus, 1831.

of the absolute, might partially exonerate Kant from such accusations and draw Kant and his young idealist readers nearer than expected.

II. Novalis' reading of Kant's *a priori*

Let us then proceed to comment on Novalis's appreciation of Kant's endeavor and, if possible, to simultaneously see the uniqueness of Novalis's views as well as the epochal contours of such an appreciation.

Kant's method – here, the *a priori* – is for Novalis symbolic of a whole kind, or manner of philosophizing, and is also its *maximum*. It is, according to Novalis, who was aware of the polemic between Kant and the super-naturalist theologians of Tübingen⁸, who was a former student of Reinhold⁹ and by then a critic of Fichte¹⁰; it is, for Novalis – we were saying – the symbol of a kind of philosophizing according to principles – *a philosophy by principles* –, which then existed precisely as a maximum of its kind, namely, as the mainstream philosophical procedure, and with which Novalis disagreed. However, for Novalis, as for other young idealists, what was especially questionable in Kant's enterprise was not the general aim of such a manner of philosophizing, but the theoretical vectors which presided over the latter. These were: 1) *a regulative, non-constitutive, strictly rational process*, according to which one departs from apodictically certain, and hence absolute principles – in a word, from the *absolute* – towards the empirical¹¹; 2) the infallibly systematical method of such a process, according to which the parts must unequivocally correspond with principles, and principles must be

⁸ On this conflict, which involved Gottlob Chr. Storr, Johann Friedrich Flatt, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Karl Reinhold and even later Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and which was of paramount relevance not only for the young students of Tübingen, but also for the pre-history of German Idealism, see especially chapters II and IX in the first volume of Henrich, Dieter, *Grundlegung aus dem Ich*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2004.

⁹ Novalis was a student of Reinhold between 1790 and 1791, alongside Fr. I. Niethammer, J. P. A. Feuerbach, Friedrich K. Forberg and Johann B. Erhard, with whom he attended lectures on Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*.

¹⁰ By then [1797], Novalis had already composed his extensive series of annotations on Fichte's Doctrine of Science, posthumously entitled "Fichte-Studien". This, as well as the "Kant-Studien", would not be published during Novalis' life.

¹¹ A conviction which, with due differences, one may find reproduced in Reinhold's and Fichte's later systems of thought, as the fundamental notions of those very systems. See on this Reinhold, Karl Leonhard, "Versuch einer neuen Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens", in *Beiträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Mißverständnisse der Philosophen*, Bd. 1, hrsg. von Faustino Fabbianelli, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2003; and Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, "Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre", in *Fichtes Werke*, hrsg. von Immanuel Hermann Fichte, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971.

necessarily reproduced in the parts – in short, as in a system of systems, or an uninterrupted circle which always rotates over itself, thus proving its own absoluteness. And lastly, as a consequence, 3) the impossibility that reflection leaves such an unbreakable circle: which meant on the one hand that *the reflection departing from absolute principles can only be referred back to absolute principles*; on the other hand, and as a result of this, *that the absolute already resides in us, and that a gradual process, even an infinite one, towards the absolute, herein taken as an ideal, is impossible* – which, to Novalis, was the final proof of a method which is indeed the maximum of its kind, but also the maximum of the one-sidedness of its kind. For, unlike the “Ancient philosophers”, Novalis adds, “Kant posits the solid, tranquil, legislating force a priori in us” (NS 2: 391) – and the mere thought of this is in itself a commendable maximum of its kind: a maximum in the possible philosophical systematization of the human spirit. But, through this, the I departs from itself in order to reach itself, it departs from the absolute in order to verify and prove that very absolute – and this *from philosophy, and through philosophy* – which to Novalis was an error, an error from which springs his discord towards Kant.

Hence, to sum up Novalis’ worries with Kant’s method, as they are alluded to in his “Kant-Studien”, they are basically two:

first, the fact that philosophy, once ruled by such an inescapable circularity, now holds the nefarious power of carving its own image – but not to expand, rather *only to restrict that image*. For *critique is no mere philosophy*. According to Novalis, “The critique already contains the transcendental point of view of the system – it is already beyond the system. It is philosophy of philosophy” (NS 2: 387). In a word, critique is something as *a second potency of philosophizing*, one which takes philosophy as its own exclusive object and takes it upon itself to homogenize the procedure, the language, the design of philosophy itself. And, as such, upon speaking, that is, upon philosophizing, philosophy, if critical, is for Novalis but *speaking of itself, of its own form, thus shaping itself upon so speaking, and by so speaking*: which is surely “one of the most singular phenomena of the human spirit” (id. 392), but, Novalis stresses, a maximum of the one-sidedness of the a priori.

Lastly, especially problematic for Novalis and for other young idealists, was the fact that, once confined to such an exiguous, such an apodictic and regulative figure, philosophy only tended to even further cloister itself, and hence to become more and more *philosophical*, which certainly

rendered it, as well as the I, less and less receptive to other congeneric fields of knowledge which are nonetheless necessary to its healthy subsistence and progress— such as aesthetics, or *poetry*. The solution, no doubt, would be to oppose this dimension of Kant's theory; namely, by rejecting the claims of Kant's critique towards rendering philosophy absolutely systematical and attaining the absolute through philosophy; a reservation which would result in *the contrary assertion, namely, the impossibility of a philosophy by principles, and the subsequent need for an infinite progression or approximation, always possible, but always ultimately impossible, to the absolute.*

III. Philosophy's double incapacity to attain the absolute. The Novalian solution of poetry

A more complete description of the previous current of thought, given its necessary detail, would prove too lengthy for the occasion. Be as it may, the aim is not to see whether Novalis', or anyone else's claims, are just or not. The important thing is that this brings to light a question relevant not only for Kant, but also for Novalis, as well as the explanation of the latter's simultaneous discord and praise of the former. Namely, the problem was *to ascertain the reach of philosophy – in this case, of Kant's a priori – in thinking the absolute; and, according to the feasibility or unfeasibility of this, philosophy's necessity to isolate itself, or unite efforts, thus rejecting, or accepting, other fields of knowledge and their languages – in this case, poetry – towards a possible cognition of the absolute.*

Novalis' view of this problem, namely, the relation between philosophy and the absolute, is linear. According to the young poet, *philosophy is not capable of attaining the absolute, because, even in its essence, in its language, in its intrinsic way of constructing and relating itself with the world – in a word, in its humanity – everything in philosophy betrays the fact that it does not possess the elasticity, the amplitude necessary for such a task. The reason for this, Novalis suggests, is clear: the course of philosophy is circular, and if it is circular, then the absolute can only be in the two axes which confer rotation to the circle: namely, a maximum, a maximum progression in knowledge, as well as a minimum, that is, a maximum return to the origin of knowledge; in other words, in total-knowledge, or in total insipience, or absence of knowledge. Now, if one thinks that both extreme axes are the extremities of philosophy's*

range, in such a way that with philosophy arises man's first cognition (Axis 1), and with it perishes man's last cognition (Axis 2) – as Novalis, Schelling, Hölderlin thought¹² –, then *philosophy can never be permitted to progress towards total-knowledge, nor to return to zero-knowledge, without thereby respectively returning to a zero degree of knowledge, or progressing towards a full degree of knowledge*: for progressing towards the end (Axis 2) also means returning to the origin (Axis 1), and returning to the origin (Axis 1) already means progressing towards the end (Axis 2) – for both are absolute, as well as absolutely and uninterruptedly circular. This means that *the human being is only granted to progress in order to return, to return in order to progress, therefore never reaching the absolute* – hence Novalis' need for an *infinite approximation to the absolute*.¹³

Now what this vision questions is precisely the two movements of Kant's a priori, and its insufficiencies (Sections II and III of this article) – which Novalis previously described as being in a *circle*. For, indeed, *philosophy as such is not granted the experience of the absolute*; and this, we have seen above. But the a priori, let it be reiterated, is no mere philosophy, rather for Novalis it is *philosophy on philosophy*; and because, according to the poet, its design is not to expand the knowledge of philosophy, rather to restrict the internal mechanisms of philosophy, the language of philosophy, philosophy itself, to a necessary extent, then for Novalis such a restriction can only mean *an extreme potentiation of philosophy* – but, *inversely, also an accentuation of its natural incapacity to think the absolute*, as seen above. The reason for this is simple. By acting, as philosophy, upon the philosophizing itself and upon its first concepts, and by attempting to return, through philosophy, to the origin of human knowledge – as is

¹² The fact that philosophy is essentially intertwined with man's reflective conception of himself – that is, his existence – is proved, among other possible examples, in Schelling's conception of the birth of philosophy with one's first question about existence (see AS I: 250), and its tendency to self-annihilation (id.: 252); in Hegel's *Differenzschrift* (1801), namely, in a chapter entitled "The need for philosophy", and in Hölderlin's "Vorletzte Fassung" of his *Hyperion*. (StA 3: 235-237). Novalis himself would be a defender of this conviction, by stating: "The genuinely philosophical act is suicide; this is the real commencement of all philosophy, thence tend all the needs of the disciple of philosophy, and only this act corresponds to all conditions and characteristics of transcendental action" (NS II: 223).

¹³ Among Novalis' many collocations of his conception of an infinite approximation to the absolute, we stress two: one drawn from fragment 640 of "Das Allgemeine Brouillon", and one extracted from the 5th group of manuscripts in his "Fichte-Studien". Namely: "There is no philosophy in concreto. Philosophy is like the philosopher's stone – the squaring of the circle, etc. – a mere necessary task of scientists – the ideal of science in general. / Hence Fichte's Doctrine of Science (...)." (NS, II: 623). And: (...) if this concept [the absolute] has an impossibility – then the impulse to philosophize would be an infinite activity – and hence endless, for there would be an eternal need for an absolute ground which could only be appeased relatively – and hence would never end (id.: 180)

the case with the a priori –, the critique, quite conversely, only succeeds in separating the I even further from its true knowledge, which, if sought for at the origin, is at the end, and if sought for at the end, is at the origin. Hence, if, according to Novalis, Kant's a priori is the maximum extreme of a progression which is return, and vice-versa, and the knowledge thereby obtained is this zero-degree, but also a total-degree of human knowledge, then, according to Novalis, it is as if *to the natural incapacity of philosophy, there had to be added a second, more artificial, but also more harmful incapacity*: namely, a second discursivity of philosophy, *the a priori*, which, because it cannot but be... *philosophy*, not only has to undergo the same errors of philosophy, but rather accentuates such errors, thereby constituting for Novalis an even greater proof of philosophy's inability to attain the absolute.

In short – Novalis would conclude – the solution for *philosophy's double and irremediable incapacity in relation to the absolute* would have to come from a *different quadrant*, and in the shape of a *different discourse*, namely, *other than that of philosophy*. Indeed, philosophy could even be part of the solution, but not on its own. *Philosophy, says Novalis, needs poetry*. But it does not merely need poetry's infinite elasticity and expressiveness. Instead, it is philosophy's natural destination to *veritably become poetry*, to assume the more enlivening and yet less (traditionally) humanized traits of poetry: "Sciences must all be poetized" (NS 1: 662). This is why, to Kant's statement according to which "Philosophy needs a science which determines the possibility, the fundamental propositions and the reach of all a priori cognitions" (AA 3: 30), which is transcribed in the "Kant-Studien" (NS 2: 390), Novalis himself replies by saying that this is not to be attained through "philosophizing", rather through the act of "handling sciences scientifically and poetically" (id.). This "firmament" of philosophy – *the need for philosophy to render itself poetical*, is philosophy's only aim, and therefore philosophy's only possibility of ever coming to know the absolute.

IV. Kant's possible (anthropological) reply

Up until now, we have not given voice to Kant, and what we have so far experienced from the method of the great philosopher, of its apparent merits and vices, we have done so through Novalis' words. This, however, is not without good reason. For the "Kant-Studien" were left unpublished by Novalis – and hence, Kant could not have known

them. Furthermore, Novalis wrote such fragments under the form of mere annotations – something which, even if published as such, could hardly have seized Kant’s attention.

However, it is our conviction that even though Kant could not, nor perhaps would have wanted to reply to Novalis’ reservations, certain moments in the corpus of his work nonetheless offer indications as to *what such a reply could have been – had it been formulated as such*. We shall now try to reconstruct such indications under one such form, so as to be able to provide a full image of the debate around the question of the absolute; not, of course, to use them against Novalis, or in favor of Kant; for, let it be noted, if Kant would never come to know Novalis’ remarks, Novalis too, by the time of his “Kant-Studien” (1797), could not yet have knowledge of the two focusing points of Kant’s work where, in our view, this reply could arise: the *Anthropology in a Pragmatic Point of View*, published one year later, in 1798, and the *Lectures on Anthropology*, ministered by Kant between 1772 and 1796, but published only after the demise of both authors. But this much we will say: had Novalis known Kant’s anthropological work, and he might even have maintained his discord towards the latter’s critical work; but he would surely acquiesce that, *grosso modo*, his opposing arguments would then be rendered somewhat inappropriate in relation to Kant’s real opinion on the matter.

Hence, the question is: *what is the role of anthropology amidst the problem of the absolute*, which is apparently so unrelated to it? *What decisive role might anthropology play in relation to philosophy and poetry*, and their now united, now separate quest for the absolute; that is, in relation to the a priori, to a philosophy by principles and its subsequent separation from other domains and from poetry, or to the contrary of this, and its subsequent approximation to poetry, as was Novalis’ wish?

Kant himself would answer these questions in the *Proemia* and *Prolegomena* to his lectures on the new science of man; and this, by describing the relation of his pragmatic anthropology, as a field of knowledge, with other scientific domains. Namely, anthropology is the study of the relation between the I as human being (*Ich als Mensch*) and the I as soul (*Ich als Seele*) (AA 25.1: 13) – that is, something like an ante-chamber, a pre-philosophy of the I (world-I), prior to a real philosophy of the I (I-soul). Anthropology, so says Kant, is the *pro positu corporis*, not the transcendental study of Man; it studies that which in human beings, and in their relation with the world, is *not a priori*, rather “natural”

(id.: 8) in them; it is the doctrine of “each trait of humanity (id.: 244), the “source of all human actions” (ibid.), and it aims at observing human beings, and their behavior, so as to extract from them the best idea of a “prudent use in life” (id.: 472) of such cognitions and traits. In a word: *pragmatic anthropology departs from phenomena so as to find laws, principles for them: “To observe human beings and their behavior, to bring their phenomena under rules, is the aim of anthropology”* (AA 25.2: 733); and hence it is the propaedeutic of all sciences (see AA 10: 145), and particularly of philosophy, inasmuch as it gives philosophy, under the form of such principles, much of its knowledge: “It [anthropology] lays in our hands the subjective principles of all sciences.” (AA 25.2: 734-735).

Now, if we recall Novalis’ reservations, these underscored the greatness, and yet the narrowness of Kant’s critical method. According to the poet, Kant’s philosophical method was indeed the “maximum of its kind”, maximum meaning however not only supreme questioning, through absolute principles, of the rational nature of man, but also the fact that such a priori principles resulted in a philosophy wherein the I only rotated upon itself, describing the circle of one’s own reflection to and fro, between innate principles and the pre-defined result of those principles. This was, in a word, Novalis’ position as to Kant’s a priori. But if one looks at Kant’s previous conception of anthropology, and its relation with philosophy, one may now see that such fields of knowledge with which we have been dealing had, in Kant’s spirit, *a whole different disposition than that which was known to Novalis*. Namely, the circle of the I is not confined to the absolute principles and its repercussion in phenomena, or to the philosophical expression which philosophy thereby assumes – the critique –, and much less does it start with absolute principles, or end with phenomena, as was Novalis’ opinion. Quite on the contrary, *this circle was far ampler*, and had nothing restrictive, or vicious, about it. For, as it seems, *it starts not with absolute principles, but rather with the phenomena from whence anthropology itself, as the propaedeutic of all sciences, departs*; and since, according to Kant, the knowledge of pragmatic anthropology is set to seek and to progress towards laws which may rule over it, and which are the laws of human nature, of human faculties, of the different characters, of behavioral traits, of the actions of men – in a word, of human existence – *then those very laws or principles which rule over human reason are not beginning and end, rather an intermediate state, though a nuclear one, in the circle of Kant’s understanding of man. Namely, philosophy, the critique are born where anthropological knowledge ends, and anthropological knowledge reappears once*

the critique duly applies its principles upon the phenomena: "The ground of pragmatic knowledge is the knowledge of the world, where one can make use of all theoretical cognitions" (AA 25.1: 469). For such absolute principles must also be proved, that is, they must once again re-extend over phenomena, over human life, just as once these phenomena led to principles; otherwise, were it not for such a reciprocity, and one such system of thought would be... no system at all.

This, we think, leads to a triple conclusion:

1) First of all, that, according to Kant, the a priori, the absolute principles are not an original departure point, nor the unavoidable horizon of all knowledge, as was Novalis' opinion, rather *the cornerstone, the driving force of this very system, of the very I and the knowledge it acquires of itself.* For it is Kant's view that regardless of the a priori, there is a whole world of valid cognitions – be it of those from which the a priori is formed, such as those of anthropology, be it of those which the a priori itself forms and validates, in other sciences. Hence, this means that the a priori is first and foremost a stage, a phase through which the I must necessarily pass in the course of his self-cognition: for behind it, and in front of it, is for Kant the philosopher, and especially for Kant the anthropologist, a world wherein the I lives as a human being.

2) Secondly that, according to Kant, the critical enterprise is not an extreme potentiation of philosophy, or of the language of philosophy, nor is it dead crystallization of the procedures, the mechanisms, the discursivity of philosophy, as was alluded to by Novalis. Instead, it is at the same time the ultimate, metaphysical consummation of principles which anthropology, as its propaedeutic, has passed on to philosophy, and the first, a priori preparation of principles which are to conduct the human spirit in the process of its self-knowledge. In a word, the critique is for Kant not the cloistering of the I and philosophy in themselves, rather the closure of an anthropological chapter, and the simultaneous opening of a philosophical one: the opening to a more certain knowledge of the world, and of himself, by the I – once again, *as if the critique, and with it philosophy, were but an inverted anthropology, and anthropology were an inverted critique.*

3) Thirdly, that, according to Kant, philosophy as a domain is not at all unreceptive to other domains, rather it is open to them. Indeed, Kant's circular understanding of man is wider than Novalis thought, and it

reads not *principles-phenomena-principles*, and so forth, rather *phenomena-principles-phenomena*, and so forth. That is, the a priori principles through which philosophy is governed may even be, in Kant's view, the first, and therefore central among the remaining human cognitions; but even these, upon being perceived, need matter to exist and to be understood as such, as well as other cognitions whereupon they may be applied. Now, the same happens to philosophy, which is indeed circular, but not, according to Kant, *uninterruptedly circular, or cyclical; that is, which must be and is for Kant a philosophy of principles, but not a philosophy by principles – or ruled by a single principle*¹⁴ – as was pointed by Novalis. Instead, so thought Kant, philosophy demands the contribution of other sciences, other fields of knowledge, other *sensibilities*, to function properly; something other than this, and one might think that Kant envisaged a pre-established language, or even a pre-defined course of philosophy, when Kant's true objective was rather to unite the voice of philosophy to that of other non-philosophical domains, and to render the proportional union, the joint harmonization of all these domains the only possible destination of philosophy.

V. Kant's concept of poetry.

Its benefits to philosophy and relation with the absolute

Finally, in light of these three conclusions, we would add that the previous differences, *now almost affinities between Kant and Novalis*, still have a further, final development, and that the repercussions of this final development go straight to the core of Novalis' refutation of Kant – namely, with regard to the possible, or impossible representation of the absolute by philosophy and the suggested contribution of *poetry* towards this aim.

As is known, even prior to the genesis of his critical endeavor, the topic of the necessary restrictions, or the natural claims of philosophy in relation to the ideal, or the absolute, was always an omnipresent theme in Kant's spirit¹⁵, as it would be later for Novalis. For both Kant and Novalis believed in the importance of this topic; and even though

¹⁴ As was indeed for Reinhold (the principle of consciousness, the first and last of his *Elementarphilosophie*) and for Fichte (the principle of identity, the first and last of his *Doctrine of Science*).

¹⁵ The theme – under the guise of the topic of finite-infinite – is recurrently dealt with by Kant throughout his *Lectures on Metaphysics*, and reemerges not only in the *Lectures on Anthropology*, but in the work *Anthropology in a Pragmatic Point of View*.

Novalis saw in it *philosophy's impossibility of experiencing the absolute*, and Kant precisely *this very possibility*, that did not prevent them both from believing that philosophy, human rational thinking, the superior faculties of the spirit – in a word, the reflecting I – had very natural, for very human insufficiencies, and that, precisely due to such weaknesses, *philosophy should not part, rather unite, in favor of its own progression, with other knowledges*. Now, what Novalis did not know, nor could he know, was that this was the opinion, not just of Kant the philosopher, but especially of Kant the anthropologist: but even further, that *precisely in the field of anthropology, which opens to that of philosophy, that same Kant elects, among other human cognitions and discourses, that of poetry – as did Novalis – as the main factor of stimulation of philosophical discourse in general*.

To explain this, we shall resort to a well-known Kantian image, akin to the topic of the absolute: that of the *theory of representation*, dealt with in the *Lectures on Anthropology*, and then resumed in Kant's critical work. Here, it is Kant's view that cognitions, or human representations, compose a vast field, a map (see AA 25.2: 868) – *the totality of which being, of course, the absolute knowledge of the human spirit*. Among the latter, certain cognitions are rational, and therefore clear; they need only this or that faculty of the spirit, and depend on philosophy – its study, its observation – not to fall into obscurity. But these illuminated points, which are the basis of philosophy, and of all human knowledge, are but a minority in the map of the representations of the human soul (id.). Quite conversely, it is the remaining unknown, *obscure representations* which are in far superior number (ibid.). This means that if, on the one hand, *the obscure representations are that which separates man from absolute knowledge*, on the other hand, because they are the embryo of clear ones (see ibid.), *they are also that which links man and the absolute, that is, man's only hope to attain the absolute*. For, as sensible, non-intellectualized representations, obscure representations contain an obscure truth, and it is they that give rise to new human cognitions. And since, according to Kant, from them arose not only all present knowledge, but in them is prepared all possible future knowledge (see id.: 869) – in a word, *the absolute* – then this means that precisely in this hiatus between what is known and what is unknown to us, between what we see and what we do not see, unfolds to Kant the whole progress of knowledge and human philosophy, and also the possible or impossible attainment of the absolute.

Now, precisely because this task of the absolute, the aforementioned circle, is *long* – but, quite contrary to Novalis – *attainable*, Kant states that it is the philosopher’s task to discern this very special potentiality of representations, and progress towards a total enlightenment of the human being, thereby bringing the latter, as well as the former, to clarity (see AA 25.2: 871). But be it by the invisible action of Providence, or by natural human insufficiency, such an occasion in which an obscure representation is revealed is very special and rare (see *id.*: 1221). So special, Kant adds, that neither the philosopher, nor the strictly rational man are prepared for it, and *both the critique and the a priori are here of little help*. Here, instead, a “happy relation” (AA 5: 317), not at all rational, between the powers of the mind, is required¹⁶; and so here, the philosopher must discern the need for *a whole different disposition*, not only of Man’s powers, both superior and inferior, but of *Man’s spirit as a whole*: namely, a very specific disposition, or re-disposition of the faculties, to which concur sensibility, memory, the faculty of imagination, wit and genius, but also the understanding and reason, herein in *a singular play* with one another¹⁷; and a re-disposition of the spirit, now open to the infinite, and very beneficial potentialities of obscurity, of unconsciousness, even of irrationality, brought about by this very game. *This game, Kant asserts, thereby inadvertently joining his voice to that of Novalis, is that of poetry: the root of all inventions, mother of all creations of the spirit and driving force of human discursivity and knowledge*. And hence, the philosopher’s task is here to heed to the poet, so that philosophy may once again be one with poetry; for only in poetry is the source and the final product of such a singular re-disposition of the human spirit, which it simultaneously reflects and creates; only in poetry is the capacity to extract from apparent obscurity, from apparent ignorance, from phenomena, truths – principles – of human knowledge, which must be presented to the understanding under different colors, and accepted by the latter for his and for philosophy’s own sake¹⁸; and, in turn, only philosophy has the ability to understand such benefits, and

¹⁶ In Kant’s own words, in his third Critique: “the happy relation, which no science can teach and no diligence learn, of finding ideas for a given concept on the one hand and on the other hitting upon the expression for these, through which the subjective disposition of the mind that is thereby produced, as an accompaniment of a concept, can be communicated to others. The latter talent is really that which is called spirit: (...) to express what is unnameable in the mental state in the case of a certain representation and to make it universally communicable (...)” (AA 7: 317).

¹⁷ According to Kant, in his *Anthropology in a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), poetry is “a game of sensibility ordered by the understanding”, which “produces from itself new figures (compositions of the sensible) in [the] faculty of imagination” (AA 7: 246-247).

¹⁸ See on the topic of poetry Kant’s “Entwurf zu einer Opponenten-Rede” (AA XV.2: 903-935).

ascribe the new representations, as well as poetry, due path and utility towards an ever growing human knowledge. In a word, only in both, and their cooperation, is for Kant the possibility to attain the absolute – to progress in the “firmament” (NS) of philosophy, across the whole extension of human knowledge.

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Como citar:

Silva Fernando. ““A Maximum in its kind”. The problem of the absolute between Novalis and Kant”. *Discusiones Filosóficas*. Jul.- Dic. 20 (35), 2019: 15-29. DOI: 10.17151/difil.2019.20.35.2.