Issues in the Ontological Determination of Populism

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Abstract

Populism is currently one of the most studied socio-political topics. However, no shared definition is present at the moment. Fortunately, common features are emerging in recent studies, so that the possibility to devise a comprehensive concept of populism does not seem illusory anymore. In this article I evaluate whether an ontological determination of the concept is conceivable, according to a critical and dynamical perspective. This means that epistemological questions are considered as fundamental, and ontology looks at dynamical systems theories in order to conceptually organize the outcomes of scientific researches. Taking advantage of ontological and system theoretic categories, I try to delineate some not obvious issues in the current approaches to populism.

Keywords:

1. Introduction

After a long oblivion, the notion of populism is now one of the most debated in political sciences and political philosophy. The cause of its reemergence can be easily found in the recent, resounding political events in Western Countries. Examples are United States of America, United Kingdom or Italy, where parties and leaders that won the last national polls (or supported the referendum on the exit from the European Union) were deemed as exponents of a new populistic wave looming over the Democratic World. This grim view hardly matches with the

old meaning of the term "populism" – which derived from historical descriptions of political movements in the late 19th century (in U.S.A. and Russia) or of South-American governments in the middle of 20th century (see Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). In these cases the notion of populism have a positive meaning when it denoted a type of politics battling against oligarchic regimes. On the contrary, "populism" in the current connotation looks like a synonym of "demagoguery," which is generally attributed to political adversaries operating outside the usual institutional and hierarchical party system.

Moreover, we cannot see, in the current approaches to populism, any shared definition of the term. Nevertheless, there are common features in academic studies: populist groups and leaders turn out to be essentially characterized for the opposition to elites, including intellectual elites such as the academics. This is connected to another issue. Scholars themselves seem to be invoked by institutional operators as defenders of the classical image of representative democracy, where the party system cannot accept the presence of tribunes of the people. As a consequence, the antagonism should involve the academic analyses, too. In fact, they often begin with a representation of populism as a problem, an alteration or even a pathological state for the democratic societies.

It is easy to see how such a situation brings about various problems to the scholars that decide to address the topic. A political juncture that is seen as threatening (even beyond any actual evidence) hardly can be the best motivation and create the prerequisites for a serious academic research. Moreover, that the choice of the topic depends, from the very beginning, on how political and media operators define their adversaries cannot be an assurance of unbiased premises – specially, if those definitions are used as starting points.

Despite the present unsettling scenario, and the lack of a unique shared definition, the opposition between people and elites remains the

core of any scientific approach to populism (see Rooduijn 2018). This makes less remote the possibility of conceiving a comprehensive idea of populism and allows to distinguish the vulgar or journalistic views from the academic ones.

The scope of this paper is to discuss the first steeps of a conceptual determination of populism. More specifically, my aim is to conceptualize populism in ontological terms by taking into consideration recent achievements, but also addressing the potential methodological problems that axiologically biased presuppositions can bring on the research. The ultimate horizon of the ontological analysis should be indeed to harmonize the current conceptual studies with the phenomenal models at the psychological, sociological and political level. Of course, the present work amounts only to a preliminary and absolutely rhapsodic attempt and will leave many important points totally untouched.

Naturally, the first question here is why the determination I want to reach has to be ontological. An answer could be the following. If ontology is hypothetical[1], categorical and stratified theory as it appears in Nicolai Hartmann's work, then it could be the perfect framework for the determination of a complex and undefined subject such as populism.

Indeed, an hypothetical ontology allows to work on a debated notion by developing different relational networks and without assuming one of them as the ultimate or fundamental frame. The scope of the

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[1] In Hartmann's general view, ontology is the *philosophia ultima* from the point of view of human knowledge, because the abstract determination it produces must derive from the more concrete results of scientific researches, and not by pure deduction from self-provided principles (see Hartmann 1935). In fact, even if ontological presuppositions stem from scientific theories, the interpretation of the theories is inevitably philosophical in nature. This prompts ontology to remain hypothetical. Indeed, any general assumption about the "being qua being" amounts to a metaphysical thesis, and these are always to be considered as provisional starting points that must be put into discussion when the results of empirical knowledge are at odds with them. The necessary (limited) set of metaphysical presuppositions that any ontological – but also scientific – theory assumes at the beginning, in Hartmann's view, is the answer to problems that cannot be solved with certainty (see Hartmann, 1924).

ontological determination, indeed, is to point out the essential categories that are actually used in real models in order to predict processes and explain data. The systemic connection with general theories is a secondary aim depending on a more abstract research that can be addressed only in a successive step.

The attention to categories (instead of objects) excludes the philosophical obsession with the definitions that are based on the subject-properties paradigm. The latter is dependent on a substantialist view on ontology, and presupposes strong metaphysical choices. As widely known, metaphysical preference for eidetic or super-individual entities turns out to generate endless dispute about the reducibility of apparently complex phenomena to more fundamental ones. Problems of this kind are not surely avoidable for ontology in the long period, but – again – can be seen as dependent on more abstract researches. Also, decisions concerning basic metaphysical viewpoints might not change the essential categories of the phenomenon at hand.

In this context, moreover, the general ontological theory of a stratified world may be highly helpful. From its perspective, indeed, taking into account the contributions from various disciplines is mandatory. In the stratified view any observer can identify different and partially independent systems of phenomena at different levels of descriptions or when adopting different parameters. This makes methodological pluralism licit, if not needed, from the beginning of the research.

Another important feature of Hartmann's critical ontology is the conceptual connection with a system theoretic background and, in particular, with the framework of the dynamical system theories. The relation between critical ontology and system theories is certainly historical – Hartmannian categorization in *Philosophie der Natur* (1950) avowedly underlies the seminal Von Bertalanffy's *General System The-*

ory (1968) – but also "substantial." The focus on dynamics and systems through the reference to categories of processes (instead of properties of substances) and to layers and spheres of being (instead of isolated objects) is directly connected with the peculiar solutions to epistemological and methodological questions (see Hartmann 1938; 1940). And these can become relevant even in the study of complex phenomena such as populism.

In the next section a brief survey of the essential aspects of four current approaches to populism will be presented. I shall highlight some questions they raise and the relevance for an ontological determination of the notion. The successive section will introduce - in purely philosophical and untechnical terms – those features of dynamical system theories and "systems ontology" that are most relevant for the question of defining populism. In the concluding section I shall suggest a potential route to address conceptual problems concerning studies about populism.

2. Concepts and phenomena of populism

Populism has been studied by different perspectives and different disciplines. An exhaustive analysis of them is not my aim here, even if it would be a necessary precondition for the complete determination of populism from the viewpoint of critical ontology. This paper, instead, has the humbler task of delineating a mere sketch of the basic problems that the phenomenon raises.

For this reason, I consider now only few conceptual accounts: three (or four) derive from political sciences, one from philosophy. The choice depends on the level of phenomenal complexity those disciplines take into account. Supposing that populism is a socio-political phenomenon,

fine-grained (for instance, only sociological or only psychological) analyses would have been too narrowed to encompass all aspects of the question[2].

The "discursive" or "ideational account" of populism is apparently the most considered in political sciences, though the so called "political-strategic approach" is still well received, given its *Realpolitik* appeal (see Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). The former can actually be distinguished in an old version, the discursive view, and a more recent one, the ideational approach. The discursive view sees populism as the ideological content of actual discourses of populist leaders to their followers in order to take advantage of their support. That content sustains an antagonistic view of democracy in which the silent majority supporting the leader corresponds to the "true people of the nation" – a term that is not thought to have a real historical and social content. People opposes minority forces, which nevertheless maintain the institutional power and are negatively connoted, according to the predominant ideology (see Laclau, 1977; 2005). For its abstractions and generalizations this view is criticized by the new ideational approach (see Mudde, 2017), which instead considers populism as a "thin" ideology (Mudde, 2004), which is characterized by people-centrism, anti-elitism and the moral opposition between the good majority and the evil minorities (locally connoted). The elements of such a minimal ideology does not need to be seen under the tenets of a systematic ethico-political theory (see Rooduijn, 2018). Some researchers, however, continue to consider essential for populism the specific content of public

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[2] There is also a definition of populism from political economics that has the apt level of specificity. It describes populism as a set of political activities that a government voluntarily and irresponsibly carries out disregarding economic equilibria and eventually generating crises (Sachs, 1989; Dornbusch and Edwards, 1991). The lack of any exemplary economic and political collapse in (nominally) paradigmatic cases of populism reduced the interest in such an approach, but the recent (and next) events in Venezuela or UK may change the situation. In this case, however, the above summarized economical description of populism should undergo a substantial modification.

discourses rather than any implicit ideology (see Hawkins, 2010). However, though the distinction between ideology and content of actual public discourses could be ontologically relevant, the defining feature of populism remains the ethical opposition of two political adversaries, the people and the elites. In this sense, populism is distinguished from other thin ideologies, such as nativism, "which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde, 2007: 19).

In the political-strategic approach (see Weyland, 2001) and in the socio-cultural approach (see Ostiguy, 2009) the focus is on the relation between the "people" and its leader, who is seen as a charismatic and projective figure rather than a mere spokesperson. In the strategic or organizational view, in particular, populism is the direct mobilization of the unorganized majority by an individual leader in order to take and exercise government power. The support from the unorganized majority is gained through the use of an ideology instead of economic or military forces. Again, the ideology itself is not particularly structured. On the contrary, it is fluid and capable to change, if needed. Thus, its content remains a secondary element of the phenomenon. The core element is then the top-down relation between the charismatic leader and the people, which turns out to be mere supporters of his/her power (see Weyland, 2017).

On the other hand, the cultural or performative approach concentrates on the style of those political actions that nourish the relation between the leader and the unorganized supporters. The performance and the narrative – in which the antagonism people-elites is solvable thanks to the presence of the redeeming hero, the leader – causally explain the possibility of an unorganized support for the individual leader. Indeed, both content and style of leader's performances help

to build the shared socio- and politico-cultural identity the *rapport* between the two poles of populism turns around. Thus, the relation leader-people is the core element in this case, too, but is not seen as a mere top-down relation. It is, on the contrary, a "two-way phenomenon." Indeed, it generates a process of identification between leader and people. Also, it promotes a public assertion ("flaunting") of their cultural stance at a social and political level. This stance is called the "low" (Ostiguy, 2017: 73–74). The low would consist in the choice of vulgar, coarse, uninhibited, direct manners in social relations, and a personalistic decision making in politics (Ostiguy, 2009).

The socio-cultural approach – with its references to Weberian themes, like charisma and "affectual narrative" (Ostiguy, 2017: 75), and to the idea of identification – has many points in common with the recent philosophical accounts of populism that see the phenomenon as a pathological state of democratic societies and regimes. Such a pathological approach is sometimes used in the context of political sciences (see Rosanvallon, 2008). However, philosophers tend to widen the purely analogical schema by giving specific definitions of the adopted concepts, sometimes in an ontological fashion (see Hirvonen, 2018). Moreover, some also proposes models for the phenomenon. An instance are those that use a neo-Hegelian view on recognition and social pathology. The process of recognition is then compared to a struggle to obtain the public acknowledgment of one's own identifying role, and the society appears as an organism whose living functions can be impaired (see Honneth, 2014). Thus, it is argued that the structural cause of populist phenomena is a deformed recognition of populists' collective identity due to the populists themselves. Their disposition to simplify and reify social identities (projecting group's idealized features onto the leader) impedes the legitimate struggle for recognition. For a correct process of recognition is made impossible by the same quality of

the public discourse that populist groups and leaders propose (see Hirvonen and Pennanen, 2018).

The four approaches to populism have various conceptual issues, which are often highlighted in the debates among the scholars. For example, the ideational approach is criticized for missing the crucial point of the matter, the relation between the alleged "people" and the charismatic leader. On the other hand, the strategic approach is considered an excessively narrow view, which underestimates the ideal side of the relation, though the ideology is the only feature adoptable to distinguish populism from forms of demagoguery or despotic power – a distinction that, perhaps, the strategic approach does not want to do. In general, the charge is that each approach is unable to encompass all the recognized cases of populism. However, even the desire to provide a nominal definition of the notion is contested. One reason is that we are not able to identify the basic features of populism as a set of actual phenomena. Some then suggests to look for an ordinal category that distinguishes grades of populism (or characteristics whose values in a certain situation can qualify a phenomenon as populism) or anti-populism (see Ostiguy, 2017).

From a philosophical point of view, the question could be even more relevant, if one makes some basic epistemological considerations about the possibility of determining all-encompassing categories. We shall address the issue in the final section. Now, other two critical points are to be noted. First, the problem of providing a shared definition is due to a simple fact: even in the restricted set of approaches here considered, there is no agreement on the basic characteristics of populism as a phenomenon. To be honest, not all the approaches see populism as phenomenal. The ideational approach, indeed, considers it as an ideology. Moreover, its supporters seem to judge as almost immaterial whether populism is an ideal content, a narrative, or rather

a real relational phenomenon, an actual schema of documented discourses, an exercised style, a particular organization of the political power and so on (see Mudde, 2017; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Rooduijn, 2018).

As one would expect, the question is by no means immaterial in ontology. On the other hand, a second issue is ontologically relevant: as said at the beginning, most of the attempts to define populism are committed to an axiologically biased stance on populism itself. Exemptions are the recent version of the ideational approach and, in part, the socio-cultural approach, which indeed criticizes the extreme position of the strategic approach. According to the latter, indeed, the antagonist narrative (about the people being unjustly subjected by the power of the elites), which is assumed by the populist leader, would be only instrumental to take and keep the government thanks to the votes of the followers. And this interpretation of leader's conscience as hypocritical is judged as epistemically problematic, if not untenable (Mudde, 2017; Ostiguy, 2017).

Arguably, such an epistemological problem is less serious than another one. The idea of a strategic bad conscience – or the slightly less epistemically sententious view of populism as a pathological state for representative democracy – presupposes that only inauthentic or deformed relations can explain the acquisition of power by not institutionalized political agents from unorganized groups. Another, even stronger presupposition is that the classical party system and its hierarchical and impersonal organization of the authority would be – not only normatively, but also descriptively – the natural state of democratic societies. In other words, those views are excessively static with respect to the socio-political processes underlying the macro-phenomenon of democracy. From a more dynamical stance, we cannot currently say – without a previous aptly focused research – whether pop-

ulism is an occasional perturbation of a stable structure (i.e., representative democracy and party system), or its deadly crisis, or the transition to another state of the socio-political system. The answer to this question cannot come *a priori* or by stipulation, but should depend on the (tested) results of a multidimensional – and hopefully multidisciplinary – study about the socio-political system itself. In this context, an ontological research may be helpful to coordinate the categorical analysis of the scientific results, especially if it is able to make use of conceptual tools for a multidimensional (and multidisciplinary) study. Tools of this kind come from the system theories.

3. Systems and dynamics

My primary assumption here is that critical ontology can be considered for the regulative role in the conceptual analysis of populism studies – especially, if those studies are part of a multidisciplinary research program. Another premise of this work concerns the advantage of connecting critical ontology to the system theoretic framework. The connection between critical ontology and system theory is based on the shared interest in processes and ideal spaces representing the development of processes. This link was seen not only in the earlier days of system theory (see Bertalanffy, 1972), but also in more recent times. Scholars both in ontology and general theory of systems have already outlined a research program that adopts the conceptual and formal instruments of the two frameworks in order to redefine complex multidisciplinary matters in an integrated manner (see, for instance, Rousseau et al., 2018)[3].

Now, coming back to the matter at hand, how may the system theoretic framework be useful in the analysis of socio-political studies?

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[3] In the most recent cases the connection with ontology consists of various references to philosophical doctrines in system theory, but there is no direct mention of Hartmann's work.

The answer to this question can derive, primarily, from considerations concerning the so-called "dynamical approach" in science, which often expresses the general philosophical viewpoint of system theories. The dynamical approach is originally associated with metaphysical interpretations of physical theories and has been connoted in various, even antithetical ways[4]. According to the standard viewpoint of this approach, any phenomenon – whether natural or social – is (part of) an evolving process whose dynamics can be described through mathematical tools as a trajectory unfolding in an ideal space defined by apt parameters. In particular, the "dynamical system theories" interpret the evolution of processes as layered, and every layer (or level) is seen as a relational network of interacting systems embedded in an active environment, which in turn can be a single system at the higher level.

This untechnical sketch might not say much to really envision the potentiality of those theoretical tools when applied to complex phenomena such as the social ones. Hopefully, a more technical presentation could be of help, but it cannot be exposed here in an proper manner. It should start with saying that a dynamical system consists at least of three mathematical entities, i.e., the triple $< T, S, \varphi_t >$. The (ordered) set T represents time, which can be discrete or continuous, while S is the state space, whose dimensions number depends on the number of variables that are needed to describe the system states, and of the parameters (time is one of them) that are used to define the variables. The space can thus be even infinite-dimensional, and, again,

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[4] Sometimes, despite its name, the dynamical approach expresses a static worldview. This curious conclusion derives from the relatively renowned theory in philosophy of physics according to which the nature of spacetime (its laws, structure and dynamics) depends on the dynamical laws of matter and energy. This view is called "dynamical approach" in spacetime philosophy (Huggett and Hoefer 2018). The approach stems from a relational view on spacetime (space and time are not essential properties of material entities and are relative to them) and has generated reductive and eliminative theses about spacetime *per se* and, consequently, about the natural processes – or what was considered to be a process from a phenomenological point of view (Pinna, 2015).

continuous or discrete. The states are defined through mathematical objects like vector fields, which inhabit the space. The function φ_t is a map from S to S that, given an initial state x_0 of S at an initial time t_0, picks up another state x_t of S at a different time point t in T. Such a function (or family of functions) can be (explicitly or implicitly) defined, for instance, by differential or difference equations (in a mathematical theory), but also by algorithmic rules (in the program of a Turing machine).

The very interesting feature of this kind of theorization is that it strictly depends on the specific model that is actually used, rather than the general laws governing systems evolution in the ideal space. This is clear when the dynamical function (the fundamental law) is unable to describe a state with the desired precision in the model in use – for instance, because of the presence of perturbations, the complex nature of the elements involved, or the dynamical complexity itself. In such situations one can decide to try other ways: to consider only limit sets of the system (small subsets of the state space that are invariant with respect to the dynamics); to describe the dynamics of the system rescaling the parameters; or, also, to build another ideal space where to describe the change in the evolution of some variables as one or more parameters are varied[5].

There are various attempts to expand this viewpoint and apply the dynamical systems theories outside the realm of natural sciences in the direction of sociology and psychology. Much of the work in this sense turns around the possibility to use the mathematical tools for predictive models. It would be surely the ultimate goal of such a scientific enterprise, if eventually realized. However, the conceptual tools of dynamical system theories – if adapted to the specific domains,

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[5] Among the technical introductions to dynamical system theories, for instance, Bar-Yam (1997) appears to be accessible and presents various philosophical and practical suggestions.

hopefully, with the help of apt ontological categories – can be of great help for the development of a global multilayered explanation of complex socio-political phenomena and, consequently, for the historical understanding of crucial events and their repercussions in the evolution of societies and states (see Bar-Yam, 2004; Bousquet and Curtis, 2011; Liu et al., 2014; Fellman et al., 2015).

4. Conceptual issues and ontological remedies

The best support to the proposal of using the tools of critical ontology (and dynamical system theories) to delineate a multilevel definition of populism is probably the direct analysis of some problems connected to the topic. Of course, this paper has only the humble scope to open the discussion about that kind of determination. Thus, what follows will be a mere sketch of a proper conceptual analysis, which would require a longer and deeper scrutiny of the present literature and, possibly, of new material.

Looking at the notion of populism from a critical perspective, the most looming and threatening issue does not regard the absence of a shared definition. Even the uncertainty about the ontological class of the phenomenon is not on the top of the list. Both are certainly relevant – and, also, fundamental – questions for ontology. However, an epistemological question is of much greater concern: the axiological presuppositions in the study of populism.

If the former are questions that can be resolved, hopefully, only in a late stage of the research, the epistemological issue threatens the very early steps of the study. Not properly addressing the issue can prevent researchers from understanding the complexity level of the study itself. Indeed, if something is relatively stable in the determination of what populism is, it is the opposition of populists to the elites, intellectual elites included. That in the public discourse the term is axiologically connoted (and often in a pejorative sense) even by scholars

produces conversely charges against them as institutional scientists, in particular charges of generating biased or fake theories. Such a situation, in turn, reinforces the opposition between subject and object of study.

In other words, the situation can be delineated as a sociological case of "observer effect" at various levels. Generally, the effect denotes the typical absence of isolation for the observational context, because the observers do not restrict themselves to initially establish the constraints of that context, but interact as active parts of it. More specifically, it would also amount to an actual case of "cultural bias," the interpretation of the phenomenon being judged through the lenses of conventions and models uncritically taken for granted as standards also in the observed context.

One could argue that, when observer and subject of observation have the same socio-political background, as it may happen in the case of populism, then the cultural presuppositions are not mistakenly taken as standards. However, a couple of objections can be raised, also by using the conceptual tools of ontology and dynamical system theories. First, those alleged standards have a normative character and can be well received only by specific social groups. At this point, if such an assumption is viewed as unproblematic, one has to declare that the planned study about populism must be ethically connoted from a specific viewpoint. And, clearly, this begs the question: the biased nature of that study turns out to be not a problem, but a prerequisite.

Second, from a dynamical perspective, we cannot know at the moment whether the phenomenon of populism is pathologic for the democracies, which are interpreted as a stable set of states in the evolution of human social systems. Namely, we are not currently able to predict whether the cases of populist governments are perturbations, crises or structural passages to new phases of social evolution. There are not enough specific studies on the matter.

Finally, the present tricky phase of populism studies might spark off, as a reaction, new forms of "knowledge enterprise" competing for methods and standards with the academic researches. The problem could be analogous to that of the so-called "memorial histories," i.e., non-academic productions that consist of direct, emotionally charged testimonies and plastic reconstructions in films, documentaries or other artistic works (see Thompson, 2000). They generally oppose academic reconstructions of critical events involving social minorities or economically weak groups as victims. Academics' works are contested for partisan perspectives and biased conclusions due to their socio-political connection with the offending groups in the described events. Despite the general, negative opinion of professional historians about memorial histories, the question the latter raise has nevertheless elicited various deep epistemological debates among scholars (see Chakrabarty, 2007; Attwood, 2008).

Individual sciences, as in the case of contemporary history, are actually less firm than they should and claim to be in their methodology and standardized epistemic procedures. In the fluid area of multidisciplinary programs, moreover, the situation can be even worse, given the scarcity of regulative figures. If ontology can be such a guide, it remains to be seen. However, the history of scientific thought has taught us that sometimes problems can be seen only if one has the correct and "evolved" lenses to look at them. And the capability to see new problems is what moves researchers towards unexpected and redefining goals – especially, when the situation seems to be stagnating.

Among the problems of populism studies we can find also another not obvious case that could benefit from the application of ontological categories. It is the previously mentioned problem of finding a complete definition of populism. Indeed, devising a concept able to catch the whole set of the intuitively recognized cases of a phenomenon is

not problematic merely because we do not possess any shared definition of populism either. Completeness *per se* is a problem, if we consider the wanted definition from an ontological point of view that is epistemologically consistent – i.e., a viewpoint that is aware that epistemological discourses are foundational for critical ontology, and that the initial operation of critical ontology consists in integrating data from sciences and not deducing theses from purely *a priori* assumptions. The desired completeness presupposes that we can create a nominal definition that can pick up every instance of what we intuitively call populist – as if, from the very beginning, our intuitions were certain to encompass any instance of a class of phenomena and, successively, theoretical reasoning had only to conceptualize. This certainty, that we can individuate by intuition precise and coherent classes, is not given. Indeed, we should think that scientific knowledge is a linear process of this sort: first, we have perfect eidetic intuitions that we apply to experience and, then, what remains for theorists to do is only verbal conceptualization. To provide eidetic classes is, on the contrary, the conceptual duty of scientific theorization for specific areas of study, and of philosophy or ontology for the general framework of human knowledge – after a long survey and scrutiny of scientific conceptualization. The origin of this work comes from a mixture of both empirical intuitions and pre-theoretical (ideal) insights, while its conclusions aim at reality. Indeed, classes of events/phenomena and their precise theoretical definitions are core elements of models whose validity must be successively proved. In other words, scientific knowledge is always determined by a circular process. The hypothetical stance of Hartmann's critical ontology should remind theorists exactly of this point[6].

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[6] See in particular the long analyses in the third part of Hartmann (1938) about the "circle of knowledge" and its formal-ontic characteristics.

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