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## INTRODUCTION



# Historical thought in German neo-Kantianism

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Two books inaugurated the revival of Kantianism in German universities in the second half of the nineteenth century. Both works were exercises in the history of philosophy. And both took to the history of philosophy with the goal of resolving contemporary philosophical quarrels. Otto Liebmann's *Kant und die Epigonen* from 1865 reconstructs the post-Kantian philosophies of the German idealists, as well as of Herbart, Fries and Schopenhauer. By demonstrating that these did not amount to progress, but rather distorted Kant's original insights, Liebmann seeks to restore sobriety and order to the "Babylonian tower-building of German philosophy" (Liebmann, *Kant und die Epigonen*, 6). First published in the same year, Friedrich Albert Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* provides a detailed reconstruction of the history of materialism from Antiquity to the present. Lange deems this historical investigation necessary if philosophy is to reach the "standpoint of the ideal", (Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus*, Vol 2., 821) from which it can act as a mediator in the conflict between scientific and religious worldviews.

From its very beginnings, neo-Kantianism thus had a historical orientation. But its goal was not to restore the past. The neo-Kantians took a strong interest in the history of philosophy in general, and in the exegesis of Kant's oeuvre in particular. But the 'return' to Kant always consisted in an adaptation of the Kantian 'spirit' to the philosophical, cultural and political challenges of the present. Liebmann's "we must return to Kant", – repeated at the end of each chapter of *Kant und die Epigonen* – is therefore less apt as an epitome of the movement than Wilhelm Windelband's "understanding Kant means going beyond him" (Windelband, *Präludien*, Vol.1, iv).

Early protagonists like Lange believed that getting the historical facts right was essential when it came to developing an interpretation of Kantianism that could prove adequate to the present. Situating oneself in the philosophical tradition, as well as in relation to the history of science, was of crucial

importance for the 'orthodox' neo-Kantians as well.<sup>1</sup> And yet, the centrality of historical reflection for both the Marburg and the Baden or Southwest school tends to be overshadowed by the charge of 'scientism.' This criticism has been prominent in Martin Heidegger's contribution to the Davos disputation and has prevailed to this day (see Heidegger, "Davoser Disputation," for a more nuanced, contemporary version of the 'scientism' worry see Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*). The main components of the charge can be summarized as follows. First, in their reception of Kant's philosophy, the neo-Kantians focused almost exclusively on the first *Critique* at the expense of the rest of Kant's oeuvre. Second, they gave a narrow epistemological reading of the first *Critique* that failed to acknowledge Kant's overarching concerns with metaphysics. Third, this epistemological reading reduced the question of knowledge to questions about the validity of mathematical natural science. These criticisms have been most forcefully directed at the Marburg school members Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp. Even Heinrich Rickert criticised the centrality of natural science in Marburg neo-Kantianism (Rickert, *Kant*, 153), although his own epistemological writings are not immune to the first two of the forementioned worries themselves.

The 'scientism' charge is not completely unfounded. But a closer look reveals a more complex picture. Rickert, Cohen, and Ernst Cassirer wrote commentaries not merely on the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but also on other parts of Kant's oeuvre, most importantly the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In the intellectual development of Natorp and Rickert one can observe a shift from epistemology to ontology and metaphysics. The Marburg school involved, from its very beginnings, a concern with the philosophy of culture and with the 'cultural sciences,' and the Baden school was heavily invested in questions concerning history, values and world-views (on the former see Luft *The Space of Culture*, Matherne, "Marburg Neo-Kantianism as Philosophy of Culture"). The neo-Kantian philosophies of the nineteenth century are best understood as integrative projects that reflect on how the conditions of objectivity and validity are embedded and realized in historical and cultural processes.

The present issue seeks to shed light on this dimension of German neo-Kantianism. It brings into focus the different ways in which historical reflection entered the thinking of orthodox neo-Kantians like Cohen, Natorp, Cassirer, Windelband, and Rickert, of philosophers who were part of the movement more broadly construed, such as Liebmann, Lange, August Stadler, Alois Riehl, and Nicolai Hartmann, as well as of figures that, although

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<sup>1</sup>The neo-Kantian 'orthodoxy' is characterized by an anti-psychologistic reading of Kant, according to which the a priori does not consist in innate cognitive structures or the psycho-physical apparatus, but in purely 'formal' conditions of knowledge and experience. For a concise account of the anti-psychologism of the Marburg school, see Richardson "The Fact of Science", for an account focused on the Baden school, see Anderson "Neo-Kantianism and the Roots".

not part of the neo-Kantian tradition themselves, were central for shaping its development and reception, like Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

To introduce some of the main forms that historical thought took in German neo-Kantianism, it makes sense to start with a clarification of what 'returning to' and 'going beyond' Kant entailed for its core members. Despite the deep differences between the Marburg and the Baden schools there are also unifying themes. One is the idea that upholding the Kantian 'spirit' consists in following the 'transcendental method'. The transcendental method has two components. First, against the German idealists who thought themselves capable of presuppositionless speculation, the neo-Kantians insisted that philosophical thinking had to start with and orient itself around a 'fact' – in Cohen's understanding of critical philosophy, this fact is science (Cohen, *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimalmethode*, 5). And second, against the empiricists and positivists who took 'facts' to be unproblematically given, the neo-Kantians understood philosophy to consist in an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of these facts.<sup>2</sup> And this conception of the transcendental method also required philosophy to take questions about history into account.

## 1. The fact of historical science

One reason for this is that in the mid-nineteenth century, the 'fact of science' did not and could not refer to the mathematical natural sciences exclusively.<sup>3</sup> At the time, impressive advances had been made in historical fields like archaeology, philology and hermeneutics. Historiography had been established as professional discipline at German universities in the early nineteenth century, and historians exerted considerable influence on the political landscape. Historical methods were also used in adjacent disciplines, and often the use of historical methods was linked to political questions. The 'historical school of law' opposed the natural law tradition and the vision of German unification, the 'historical school of economics' advocated for programmes of social reform and was often criticised for its 'socialism'. Just when research on the 'historical Jesus' stirred up controversy in theology, the reception of Darwinism and natural selection fuelled worries about atheism and historical pessimism. Alongside early experimental psychology, a historically minded *Völkerpsychologie* had emerged, and the advancing discipline of sociology

<sup>2</sup>Both schools think of the conditions of validity in terms of laws of thinking. But while for the Marburg Neo-Kantians, these laws of thinking are grounded in the synthetic activity of consciousness, the Baden school thinks of them as normative laws that ultimately are grounded in a sphere of absolute values.

<sup>3</sup>Note that the German term 'Wissenschaft' is more inclusive than the English concept of 'science', in that it includes various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. The neo-Kantians and their contemporaries referred to these disciplines under terms such as 'sciences of spirit' [Geisteswissenschaften], 'historical sciences' [historische Wissenschaften, Geschichtswissenschaften], or 'cultural sciences' [Kulturwissenschaften].

came with its own views about the laws and driving forces of human history. In short, the 'fact of science' comprised a broad variety of historically oriented disciplines, and the methodological debates ongoing in these disciplines were linked to the central ideological quarrels of the time. The neo-Kantians, consequently, sought to account for the epistemic status of the 'historical' and 'cultural sciences', as well as for the rationality inhering in the domains of culture that these disciplines were investigating.

In the Baden school, this project was carried out via an inquiry into the methods and concepts of the historical disciplines, and by providing an account of the role that values played in historical method. Like Kant, who in the *Prolegomena* had asked 'How is pure science of nature possible?', Windelband and Rickert ask how historical science is possible. They seek to reveal the conditions of validity and objectivity in the 'historical sciences of culture', and explicate how these disciplines differ from the natural sciences. The basic thought is that the natural and historical sciences differ not by subject matter, but rather by the epistemic aims that guide concept-formation and theory-construction: while the natural sciences seek general knowledge of regularities and laws, the historical sciences seek to grasp the unique and unrepeatable character of reality. Windelband thus distinguished 'nomothetic' and 'idiographic' sciences. Going beyond his teacher, Rickert developed a systematic account of the 'individualizing' concepts of history, identifying values as the grounds for the selection and connection of facts into 'historical individualities' (Rickert, *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, 277–278, 320–324).<sup>4</sup> On the basis of his reflections on method, Rickert develops an account of culture as an amalgam of empirical realities and non-empirical but intersubjectively understandable meanings. Emil Lask adapts some of these thoughts for the philosophy of law. On his view, jurisprudence is an empirical cultural science, but the empirical and historical reality studied by it is always related to non-empirical, universal values. However for Lask, the reality of culture is not structured by values only, but also by pre-scientific categories: it is "congealed theoretical reason" (Lask, "Rezension zu R. Schmidt", 309–310).

The Baden neo-Kantian concern with the grounding of culture in values ultimately lead them to the philosophy of history. Could philosophy identify general patterns of the development of humankind, and assess the historical process in terms of progress? Rickert argues that only philosophical insight into the system of absolute values provides the standpoint from which

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<sup>4</sup>The conception of 'individualizing concepts' leads back directly to the question of how to 'go beyond Kant'. Rickert criticizes Kant for restricting his account to the mathematical natural sciences. In striking similarity to Cassirer, he introduces the idea of a 'pre-scientific conceptualization,' arguing that natural scientific, i.e. generalizing, cognition is not the only form of cognition involving the application of categories. For Cassirer, primitive forms of categorization are found in myth, religion, language and art. For Rickert these are the pre-scientific conceptualizations of everyday life, as well as the specific form of non-generalizing categorization found in the historical sciences.

cultural developments can be assessed in terms of progress. Yet he also holds that values are realized historically, which is why philosophy must remain an 'open system' that is able to accommodate future developments.

As recapitulated, the Baden school reaches its account of history and culture based on a reflection on historical method. A similar approach can be found in the works of the Marburg neo-Kantians Cohen and Natorp. On Cohen's reading, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* take the facts of ethics and art respectively as their starting points: "the transcendental method everywhere adheres to the stock of cultural facts which are to be surveyed as to their conditions" (Cohen, *Kants Begründung der Ästhetik*, 190). Cohen starts not from the cultural world itself, but from the cultural sciences. He considers these disciplines as rational expressions of the cultural domains that they study. Ethics, for example, must be based on the science of jurisprudence which studies human beings to the extent that they are bound by the normative determination of law. In proceeding from the fact of the cultural sciences to an analysis of the foundations of culture itself, Cohen pursues three goals. First, he seeks to reveal the constant principles that ground and unify the different scientific disciplines. Second, on this basis, the various cultural domains can be understood as a plurality grounded in a unified system of rational principles. Accordingly, one of the tasks of philosophy is the reconstruction of culture out of this rational basis. And third, 'critical idealism' seeks to uncover and explicate the regulative ideals that guide, the historical development of human culture on the whole. Natorp too was invested in the search for the unity of culture and in accounting for the driving forces of cultural development. His central contribution to this task is a "critical psychology" that proceeds backwards from the "objectivations" of psychological experience to the concrete mental activities that create the cultural world (Natorp, *Allgemeine Psychologie*, 20).

While remaining committed to the transcendental method, Ernst Cassirer significantly goes beyond his Marburg predecessors in starting, not from the fact of the cultural sciences, but from the fact of culture itself. Cassirer finds the conditions of the possibility of this fact in the systems of signs and symbols that structure not just our experience of the world, but the very relation between subject and object. For Cassirer, the synthesizing function of consciousness that grounds the creation of an intelligible world, is to be understood as a form of symbolization which imbues even the most basic perceptions with specific cultural meanings. In the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, first published in 1929, Cassirer distinguishes between three basic formative modes or functions of consciousness that the production of symbols is based upon: the expressive function is at the basis of the symbolic form of myth; the representative function grounds natural language and our everyday experience of the world as composed

of enduring substances in a unified spatio-temporal order; and the significative function allows for the scientific construction of the world in terms of pure relational or functional concepts. Each function of consciousness engenders a specific symbolic form with a specific a priori structure. Accordingly, in each of these forms, the fundamental Kantian categories of space, time, number, causality, substance (or object), receive a distinctive configuration.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, symbolic forms have an inherent developmental tendency, such that more primitive forms are driven beyond their own limits towards higher modes of symbolization. Mathematical natural science marks the highest stage of this process since it emerges only when the spontaneous symbolizing activity of consciousness has liberated itself from sensibility. At the same time the 'fact of science' remains embedded in a more general framework of dynamically developing cultural forms that are organized around the most primitive of these forms – myth – as their common origin.

Three papers in this special issue investigate the neo-Kantian approaches to historical method and to the historicity of culture. In "Neo-Kantianism, Darwinism, and the Limits of Historical Explanation", Evan Clarke investigates how the neo-Kantians discussed Darwin's project of understanding species development by drawing on historical explanation, and how they reflected critically on the prospects and limitations of employing historical reasoning in the natural (life) sciences. Katherina Kinzel's contribution explores the Baden neo-Kantian conception of historical method as it relates to the hermeneutic conception of understanding. "Neo-Kantianism as Hermeneutics" traces how Rickert revised his views on historical method in response to developments in Dilthey's epistemology of the human sciences. Nabeel Hamid discusses Dilthey's views on historical development in more detail. "Law and Structure in Dilthey's Philosophy of History" focuses on the tensions that arise between Dilthey's critique of the philosophy of history, and his account of historical structure.

## 2. The historicity of natural science

A second reason as to why the Neo-Kantian 'transcendental method' requires historical reflection is that the mathematical natural sciences themselves are historically developing entities: the 'fact' that the transcendental method starts from is dynamic and subject to historical change. The problem of scientific change became especially pressing in the context of the anti-psychological Kant interpretation of the Marburg school. Earlier Neo-Kantians, most notably Lange and Hermann von Helmholtz, had identified the conditions of knowledge with the psycho-physical makeup of the human sensory and

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<sup>5</sup>Note that the Marburg neo-Kantians challenge the distinction between sensibility and understanding, more on this below.

cognitive apparatus. A psycho-physical interpretation of basic Kantian themes served to account for our everyday sensory experience. The two orthodox schools, however, agreed that such a 'psychologistic' account of cognition ought to be rejected. They found the a priori conditions of the possibility of knowledge to consist not in innate cognitive structures in the mind, but to be of purely logical or formal character. And they centred their analysis not on sensory experience, but on the conditions of the validity of knowledge. According to Cohen, Kant's transcendental idealism is tantamount to the discovery of a new concept of experience: sensory perception is not at all what is at stake in the first *Critique*. Rather, Kant's concept of experience refers to the content of mathematical natural science as it is determined by the synthetic activity of consciousness. This interpretation put the problem of scientific change into sharp relief. How much of Kant's theoretical philosophy could be saved in the face of the developments of non-Euclidian geometries and, later, general relativity and quantum mechanics, with which physics had moved decidedly beyond Kant's Newtonian paradigm?

The Marburg Neo-Kantians had two interrelated responses to this problem. The first consists in thinking of scientific method as inherently dynamic and progressive. Cohen develops this thought by reinterpreting the concept of the thing-in-itself. For Cohen, the thing-in-itself is not an independent, unknowable reality, but rather the totality of all experience as a limiting concept. The thing-in-itself is the final theory, a regulative ideal that the sciences are progressing towards in their historical development. Natorp further develops the idea that the progress of science is guided by the regulative limiting-concept of the thing-in-itself. In his view, science proceeds by hypotheses which transform subjective perception into objective knowledge. It is in virtue of the method of hypothesis that science achieves progressively ever more precise determinations of experience.

The second response hinges on giving up the Kantian dualism between sensibility and understanding. This allows them to think of the pure forms of intuition – space and time – as categorial thought-acts that are not essentially distinct from the understanding. With the further premise that the categories of the understanding are not universal and necessary, but amenable to revision and expansion, a picture emerges on which the a priori conditions of knowledge are not static and immutable but subject to historical change. Cassirer specifically argued that the constitutive principles that provide the conditions for the determination of the objects of scientific knowledge undergo historical change. Nevertheless, he thought that there are "invariants" of scientific thought – "universal elements of form ... that preserve themselves in all changes of the particular material empirical contents of experience" (Cassirer, *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*, 356). However, Cassirer is clear that the precise nature of these invariants cannot be determined at any given historical stage of science. Rather, the determination of



the invariants is itself an infinite task. But because Cassirer conceptualizes historical change in science as structured by transformation laws which ensure that later theories contain earlier ones as limiting cases, he can envision the entire historical development of science as a process of convergence towards a final theory which would contain all previous theories as limiting cases.

In this special issue, two papers analyse in detail how the Marburg school approaches the problem of scientific change. In “Ernst Cassirer on Historical Thought and the Demarcation Problem of Epistemology”, Francesca Biagioli focuses on Cassirer’s attempt to reconcile apriorism and historicism in an account of productive synthesis, and examines the role of structuralism in this project. Paolo Pecere’s “History of Physics and the Platonic Legacy” traces the Platonistic elements in the Marburg philosophy of physics, and the problems that they create for Marburg Neo-Kantianism in general, and Cassirer’s historiography of science in particular.

### 3. Reason, intellectual history and the historiography of philosophy

The dynamic account of science is not merely a reaction to the historical overthrow of Newtonianism. It follows naturally from how the neo-Kantians view reason itself – namely as spontaneous, synthetic and constructive. Natorp expresses this well when he translates the achievement of Kant’s Copernican revolution into the idea that the “factum” is always a “feri” (Natorp, *Die logischen Grundlagen*, 14), that is, it constitutes an achievement of the synthetic and constructive activity of reason in its historical-cultural development. This is especially evident in case of the Marburg neo-Kantians, who thought that the history of both science and philosophy were expressive of and thus could provide methodological access to reason in its historicity (see Kim, “Neo-Kantian Ideas of History”). The Baden neo-Kantians were more reluctant to give up the distinction between the active structuring capacity of conceptual thinking and an unstructured manifold of sensibility, and they firmly upheld the conviction that there was a timeless system of absolute values for philosophy to discover. Yet they too embraced a dynamic picture of reason. In particular, they shared with the Marburg philosophers the idea that philosophy, conceived as the self-reflection of reason, had to take recourse to historical reconstruction. Reason in its various manifestations in science, culture and philosophy cannot be understood by formal means alone, but rather, it needs to be encountered in its concrete historical realization. This basic idea is reflected in both schools of the neo-Kantian orthodoxy, and as well in the works of some of the pre-divide authors of the tradition.

First, in the development of their own philosophical views, the neo-Kantians regularly drew on historical reflection. Lange’s intellectual history of materialism,

Cohen's work on the history of the infinitesimal method, or Cassirer's reflections of the historical development from substance – to function-concepts are examples. For these authors, historical reflection was a preferred method in the formulation of independent and systematic philosophical contributions.

Second, the Neo-Kantians produced impressive work in intellectual history, and in the history of philosophy. Windelband pioneered the method of philosophical problem-history, which structures the historical presentation not as a chronological sequence of great minds, but in terms of the fundamental philosophical problems that individual philosophers were responding to. His 1912 *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie*, for example, distinguishes between a cosmological, an anthropological and a systematic period in Greek philosophy, and between a humanistic and a scientific period in Renaissance philosophy. The method of problem-history suggests that it is not the whim of gifted individuals, but the dynamic structure of reason itself, that in responding to the historical context and the challenges of the age produces philosophical insights. Natorp's controversial Plato interpretation, and Cassirer's works on Leibniz, on the history of modern science, as well as his impressive studies of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment are other examples of the Neo-Kantian project of pursuing intellectual history with the goal of illuminating reason in its development.

Third, the Neo-Kantians also introduced explicit reflection on the methodology of the historiography of philosophy, and on the relevance of history for systematic philosophy. Windelband declared history to be the 'organon' of philosophy. In his view, only an intellectual history that rests on a solid methodological footing would be able to account for the contextual, cultural and personal determinants of philosophical thinking. Such a history would also be capable of separating the stock of timelessly valid philosophical insights and principles from the contingent influences of time and age. With a slightly different emphasis, Rickert argued that philosophy had to incorporate the historical realization of reason and values into its 'open system'. Just as Cassirer's theory of invariants, these accounts are meant to reconcile the historicity of reason with the insistence that some principles and values remain stable and immune to historical change. Consequently, the neo-Kantians of both schools took up ideas and influences from Hegel's philosophy of history, as well as from the historicist and hermeneutic traditions.

In this special issue, two papers analyse neo-Kantian accounts towards the historicity of reason. Ursula Renz explores Cohen's and Cassirer's attempts to steer between the Scylla of a Platonism of eternally recurring philosophical ideas, and the Charybdis of reducing philosophy to cultural history. Her "Reason's Genuine Historicity" finds the solution for this problem in the Marburg account of the self-problematizing character of reason. In "The Gold of Knowledge" Gerald Hartung reconstructs Nicolai Hartmann's problem-historical approach towards the historiography of philosophy. He

reconstructs how Hartmann combines influences from Marburg Neo-Kantianism, as well as Dilthey and Windelband, and argues for the continued relevance of a philosophically reflective approach to problem-history.

The overall goal of this special issue is to provide insight into the manifold ways in which the German neo-Kantians made use of history and historical thinking, and to emphasize the centrality of the reflection on historicity and culture in the neo-Kantian tradition.

The papers in this issue extend the existing research on the neo-Kantians as contributors to the development of the cultural sciences, as a tradition distinct from, and dealing with different questions than, hermeneutics, the Frankfurt School, or contemporary cultural studies. They also contribute to the currently ongoing research that investigates the impact of the neo-Kantian tradition on the history of the philosophy of science, the influence of the neo-Kantians on the logical empiricists (especially Carnap), the relationship between the natural, human, and cultural science, the historical significance of relativity theory and the development of non-Euclidean geometry, and the historicity of science more generally. They allow us to reconsider the relevance of neo-Kantianism for questions concerning historical methodology and historical inquiry today, and for reflections on the role of the human sciences in the contemporary academic landscape.

Finally, the present issue contributes to ongoing discussions about philosophical method, the relation between philosophy and the sciences, and the relation between philosophy and its own history. In the works of the nineteenth-century neo-Kantians, we find a model of philosophy that seeks to account for the achievements of both the mathematical natural sciences, and for those of the various disciplines that study the human, historical, social and cultural world. This is also a model that tries to balance universalist commitments and normative demands on rationality with an acknowledgement of the ways in which reason is historically and culturally bound. By analysing the successes and failures of this model, the contributions to this special issue continue the neo-Kantian quest for the historical self-reflection of philosophy.

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