

# On the Neo-Kantian Revision of the Apriori

*[Sobre a revisão neokantiana do a priori]*

Kurt Walter Zeidler<sup>1</sup>

University of Vienna (Vienna, Austria)

DOI: 10.5380/sk.v20i2.90422

## Abstract

This paper tries to outline the historical background as well as the systematic guidelines of Neo-Kantianism.

**Keywords:** transcendental method; analytical vs. synthetical mode of teaching; objectivism of validity; the three directions of Neo-Kantianism.

## Resumo

Este artigo tenta delinear o pano de fundo histórico, bem como as diretrizes sistemáticas do Neokantismo.

**Palavras-chave:** método transcendental; modo de ensino analítico vs. sintético; objetivismo de validade; as três direções do neokantismo.

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<sup>1</sup> kurt.walter.zeidler@univie.ac.at

Even in the heyday of Neo-Kantianism the unsolved problem that was soon to be his undoing was pointed out by Paul Natorp, when he emphasised the “decisive demand of the transcendental method”, which consists in working out not only relations “to the existing, historically demonstrable facts of science, morality, art, religion” but also the “creative ground of all such act of object formation (Objektgestaltung)”: i.e., the

primordial law (Urgesetz), which is still understandably enough called that of the *logos*, of *ratio*, of *reason*. And this is now the second, the decisive [!] demand of the transcendental method: to prove to the fact the ground of ‘possibility’ and thus the ‘legal ground (Rechtsgrund)’, that is to say: to show precisely the ground of law, the unity of *logos*, of *ratio* in all such creative act of culture and to work it out to purity (Natorp, 1912, pp. 196sq).

And Natorp rightly rejected the reproach that could be expected in this context from an orthodox Kantianism, that with “all these investigations, which still need to be deepened, and on which our most intensive work is now directed, [...] we now seem to be steering completely back into the paths of *Fichte* and *Hegel*”, by asserting: “But still we do not go further together with them [sc. with *Fichte* and *Hegel*] than they in turn have striven to fulfil the demands which lay in the fundamental idea of the transcendental method, but which Kant himself obviously had not fulfilled” (Ibid., p. 210).

With these remarks on “transcendental method”, Paul Natorp reminds us – whether consciously or unconsciously can be left open – of an important methodological distinction made by Kant himself. Taking up the classical distinction between analytical and synthetic methods, Kant emphasised in his *Prolegomena* (1783) that these “preparatory exercises” in the critique of reason follow the *analytical* or *regressive mode of teaching*, since from the outset they take advantage of the fortunate circumstance that pure mathematics and pure natural science are two sciences in which “pure synthetic cognition *a priori* is real and given” (Prol, AA 04:§4). Thus presupposing the reality of pure synthetic cognition *a priori*, the *Prolegomena* first try to answer the questions ‘How is pure mathematics possible?’ and ‘How is pure natural science possible?’, before turning to the main question ‘How is metaphysics possible as a science?’ (Prol, AA 04:§5). On the contrary, Kant had approached this question in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781):

*synthetically*, namely by inquiring within pure reason itself, and seeking to determine within this source both the elements and the laws of its pure use, according to principles. This work is difficult and requires a resolute reader to think himself little by little into a system that takes no foundation as given except reason itself, and that therefore tries to develop cognition out of its original seeds without relying on any fact whatever” (Prol, AA 04:§4).

As the history of post-Kantian philosophy teaches, there initially was no lack of resolute readers who, following the *synthetic* or *progressive doctrine* of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, gradually thought their way into Kant’s system and soon also attempted to develop their own philosophical systems and theories from *reason itself*. Albeit, how this was to be achieved and what was to be understood by ‘reason’ in this context, was a subject on which views differed early on, with the difference in views manifesting itself above all in the sharp contrast between a speculative-idealist line of succession (*Fichte-Schelling-Hegel*) on the one hand and an anthropological-psychological line of succession (*J. F. Fries, F. Beneke*) on the other. In the middle of the 19th century, however, post-Kantian philosophy suffered a crisis of identity and legitimacy. The proliferation of idealistic systems had ebbed away and empirical psychology took over the legacy of the anthropological-psychological interpretations of Kant. Facing a wealth of new disciplines establishing themselves at the universities, academic philosophy thus found itself in a crisis of identity and legitimacy, which Neo-Kantianism countered by returning to Kant’s *analytical mode of teaching*.

Forming in the 60s and 70s of the nineteenth century, Neo-Kantianism praised Kant as the theoretician of scientific knowledge, who had linked philosophy to the “‘fact’ of science (‘Factum’ der Wissenschaft)” and thus secured for it both its own ‘object’ and its indisputable claim to scientificity. This argumentation is very clearly expressed by Kuno Fischer in his influential interpretation of Kant’s philosophy:

I see only one way out for philosophy to escape its seemingly inevitable decline and gain a new, completely independent and indisputable position. Its position is independent as soon as philosophy distinguishes itself from all other sciences; its position is indisputable when its peculiar object is just as factual as the objects of the sciences that call themselves exact. And how is this possible? Only by philosophy taking up an object which none of the other sciences investigates, none of which can investigate according to its limited position, but which is no less factual than any object of exact and empirical research. Is there, then, a fact which is recognised as such by all the other sciences, but which is not investigated by any of them? How this question is decided is how the vital question of philosophy is decided. To answer the question raised at once; yes, there is such a fact! It exists in the exact sciences themselves. [...] Kant discovered this point of view, which is fundamental for philosophy (Fischer, 1860, pp. 12sqg)<sup>2</sup>.

The interpretation of Kant’s philosophy as a theory of the exact sciences provided academic philosophy with a highly successful strategy for legitimisation and professionalisation. It opened up the most obvious way out, by which philosophy could escape its seemingly inevitable dissolution into particular disciplines and at the same time assert itself as a science and a stronghold against all unscientific ‘speculation’. However, to the extent that this basic Neo-Kantian consensus shaped the self-understanding of academic philosophy, it contributed to renewed uncertainty and ultimately to the decline of Neo-Kantianism. If one follows Ernst Cassirer’s reflections in retrospect on the recent history of the problem of knowledge, then ‘Neo-Kantianism’ was not so much the overcoming as the expression of the crisis in which philosophy found itself in the nineteenth century because of the fragmentation of scientific reason into an unmanageable variety of individual disciplines.

In his introduction to *The Problem of Knowledge* (1950) Ernst Cassirer describes the “fateful [!] dismemberment of knowledge” as the process

that dominated all scientific research in the second half of the nineteenth century and, more than any other thing, stamped its character upon it. Even the development of the problem of knowledge could not escape this tendency towards specialized isolation. [...] Thus, to recall but one single characteristic example, in the development of neo-Kantianism, the teaching of Cohen and Natorp is sharply opposed to that of Windelband and Rickert: a dissimilarity that flows of necessity from their general orientation, determined in the one case by mathematical physics, in the other by history. [...] But everyone pretends to speak not only for his own department of knowledge but for the whole of science, which he believes himself to represent and to embody in an exemplary fashion. Thus arise ever new discords and constantly sharper conflicts, and there is no tribunal that can compose these quarrels and assign to each party its respective rights (Cassirer, 1950, pp. 10sqg).

Since “a universalistic way of thinking no longer obtains in the second half of the nineteenth century”, Cassirer finally even asks himself whether there is “really any such thing as ‘knowledge’ after all”, or whether we do not rather

fall into a spurious and inadmissible abstraction in advancing such a concept? Is it not the right and the duty of each science to go its own way, unconcerned with all the others, and to develop its own concepts and methodology? But in such a case philosophy and science present a difficult

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Trendelenburg, 1862, p. 10; Cohen, 1883, pp. 5sq; Riehl, 1876, pp. 1sqg.

problem for the historian of the theory of knowledge, since there is no longer a uniform theme upon which he can lay hold and by which he can orient himself (Ibid., p. 15sq.).

As Ernst Cassirer's remarks prove, this difficult problem arises not only for the historian of the theory of knowledge, but also for the Neo-Kantian epistemologists: equating 'pure' knowledge with scientific knowledge and basing their epistemological analyses on the "'fact' of science", they oriented themselves on a 'fact' that more and more became a problem itself.

In view of the binding of neo-Kantian epistemology to the scientific objectifications of knowledge, the question arises as to what extent neo-Kantianism may be considered a legitimate heir to Kantian philosophy at all. This is a systematic question, the answer to which ultimately depends on which concept of 'transcendental philosophy' one takes as a basis. In any case, the question cannot be answered by philological means alone, because for Kant neither the "fateful dismemberment of knowledge" (Cassirer) nor the historical changes of the object 'science' did yet become a problem in this way. Rather, the historical Kant was of the opinion that in his epoch – after a long period of collecting and merely rhapsodic systematisation of knowledge – for the first time it was possible "to glimpse the idea [of an all-encompassing system of human knowledge] in a clearer light and to outline a whole architecturally, in accordance with the ends of reason" (KrV, A 834/B 862). Confident in the *universalism of scientific reason*, that now seemed to have been achieved for the first time, Kant was therefore able to link the questions about the conditions of the possibility of metaphysics and scientific experience, without thereby opting for any form of scientific reductionism. For Neo-Kantianism however, after committing itself to an interpretation of Kant's work as it can be read above all from the *Prolegomena* and from the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is beyond doubt that "Kant equates the concept of science in the Critique of Pure Reason with that of natural science and allows presuppositions of natural science, i.e. methodological forms, to become categories of objective reality" (Rickert, 1904, p. 210). It is not this presupposition, but merely the consequences that result from this presupposition for the concept of 'objective reality' and the methodology of the sciences that are at issue between the different schools and thinkers of Neo-Kantianism.

Therefore – Cassirer's remark about the perhaps lacking "profundity" of the manifold investigations of the problem of knowledge<sup>3</sup> can be understood as a cautious hint in this direction – there has never been a lack of voices accusing Neo-Kantianism of scientific reductionism. This accusation – especially in the form of a nebulous criticism of the allegedly one-sided epistemological orientation of the Neo-Kantians – has always been part of the standard repertoire of critics of Neo-Kantianism, but it misses the crucial point. From a systematic point of view – which, however, is not to be pursued in greater detail here – the crucial point is that Kantianism of the 19th century could still think that the regularities of the pure forms of perception and thought, which Kant had elicited, were guaranteed by mathematical natural science. After non-Euclidean geometries, relativistic physics and quantum mechanics had invalidated the exclusive validity of the concept of perception, object and experience of classical physics, Kantianism in the 20th century should have tackled a fundamental revision of the *a priori*. However, due to the neo-Kantian presuppositions, it was not in a position to do so, which is why Neo-Positivism (and subsequently Analytical Philosophy), by virtue of their decidedly one-sided orientation towards the 'fact' of science, were able to oust Neo-Kantianism from its very own domain with its own arguments.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly most of his critics are not able or willing to engage with the *philosophical problem of knowledge*, and thus it remains completely unclear what the specific nature of the problem reductions subsumed under the term 'Neo-Kantianism' is supposed to be. The unanimity and loudness of the criticism, not to say the contempt, that has been directed

<sup>3</sup> "Never before in the history of philosophy has the problem of knowledge stood so in the limelight; never before have such manifold and searching investigations [...] been devoted to it. Yet it is highly questionable whether this vast extension of the problem has gone hand in hand with an equal profundity" (Cassirer, 1950, p. 10).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Zeidler, 1992, p. 34; 2006, pp 8sqq.

at Neo-Kantianism for more than a century, is therefore matched by an equally characteristic and far-reaching perplexity as soon as the simple question is asked as to what is actually meant by *Neo-Kantianism*. Listing individual Neo-Kantians (which ones?) or the naming of some ‘schools’ does not answer this question, and if it is stated without further ado that “a systematic delimitation that pays tribute to all currents subsumed under Neo-Kantianism is utterly impossible”,<sup>5</sup> then the spirit of our time (*Zeitgeist*), to which all ‘systematic delimitations’ are repugnant anyway, may be reassured by this statement, but this reassurance contradicts the systematic claim that constituted the impetus and the scientific ethos of Neo-Kantianism.

If one wants to do justice to the claim and self-image of Neo-Kantianism, then one must not reassure oneself with the comfortable information that the term ‘Neo-Kantianism’ is, after all, an expression of embarrassment that confronts us with insurmountable definitional difficulties. Certainly, the generic term ‘Neo-Kantianism’ is an expression of embarrassment, insofar as it – like all other philosophical and historical labels – initially only can serve as a provisional orientation in the labyrinthine thicket of philosophical tradition. But if we want more than just provisional orientation, then we can no longer avoid a more precise definition of the term and thus the systematic question which, with regard to the term ‘Neo-Kantianism’, seems to impose itself: we have to ask *what the ‘new’ actually consists of that allows us to speak of a Neo-Kantianism*. If one surveys the history of post-Kantian philosophy in the light of this question, then the characteristic that distinguishes Neo-Kantianism from other post-Kantian positions is undoubtedly to be seen in its double opposition against psychologism and against metaphysics. As Neo-Kantianism sees itself as a counter-position to all positivist, empiricist and single-scientific psychologism, as well as to all ‘unscientific’ metaphysics and speculation, it differs from the ‘speculation’ of German Idealism as well as from Herbartian ‘realism’ or Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the will, and from the anthropological and psychological succession to Kant (Fries, Beneke) as well as from Kant himself. From the confrontation with the two systematically most significant positions, the Kantian and the speculative-idealist, it is also easy to see how this constellation leads, as it were, inevitably into an *objectivism of validity* (*Geltungsobjektivismus*): for on the one hand, Neo-Kantianism eliminates all the faculty-psychological (*vermögenspsychologischen*) building blocks of Kant’s architectonics, but on the other hand, unlike German Idealism, does not attempt to replace these building blocks with a speculative logic, i.e. a logical foundation of the Kantian a priori. Consequently, Kant’s systemic construction, which is essentially based on the parallelisation of logical and psychological structures, collapses. To be more precise, it shrinks to the much-invoked “consciousness in general (*Bewußtsein überhaupt*)”. But objectivism of validity compensates for this loss of systematics. The loss is compensated – at least superficially – by the identification of ‘consciousness in general’ with a so-called *normal consciousness* (*Normalbewußtsein*, Windelband) or *cultural consciousness* (*Kulturbewußtsein*, Cohen), which allows to understand transcendental philosophy as theory of science and culture, i.e. as a theorisation of the stocks of validity in which *normal* or *cultural consciousness* objectifies itself. At the same time, the systematic claim is maintained in this context through the emphasis on the *question of validity* (*Geltungsfrage*). The claim to a theory of value (*Werttheorie*) or validity (*Geltungstheorie*) is the neo-Kantian correlate to Kant’s Transcendental Deduction: Once the faculty-psychological struts of Kant’s architectonics of reason have been removed and fused into the quasi-psychological epitome of a transcendental lawfulness, into ‘consciousness in general’, inevitably, transcendental deduction is also reduced to a (value- or validity-theoretical) epitome of transcendental justification, since transcendental deduction in the Kantian sense is ultimately about nothing other than the justification of the parallelism of logical and psychological structures Kant initially presupposed in a merely traditional way. The claim to validity theory is therefore, along with ‘consciousness in general’, the most important motif that connects Neo-Kantianism with Kant’s transcendental philosophy. It is therefore also the motif that allows to reconstruct the systematically relevant differences between the main directions of New Kantianism, insofar as one pursues the question of how

<sup>5</sup> Häußler, 1989, p. 16.

the claim to validity could be held on to and possibly also redeemed under the given objectivist conditions.

The most obvious and systematically undoubtedly most fruitful path in the light of Kant's epistemological critique is to consistently orient oneself towards the "fact" of science" by declaring the 'synthetic principles' to be the "lever of critique" and, in a systematic continuation of this interpretation, identifying 'pure cognition' with the cognition of science. As is well known, the *Marburg School* (Cohen, Natorp, Cassirer) took this path of an objectification of the a priori.<sup>6</sup> Instead of objectifying an a priori, which is oriented towards the respective facts of science and culture, one can also objectify the claim to validity by separating validity or the supra-temporally valid values from being and reality and thus constructing a transcendent world of ideas and values. This Platonist approach to a solution, which can refer above all to corresponding formulations in Kant's practical philosophy, is pursued by the *Southwest German School* (Windelband, Rickert, Lask). Thirdly, there is also the possibility of objectifying validity as a whole. According to this, the objectivity of the a priori would not first be sought in the achievements of cultural manifestations or in a transcendent realm of values, but in reality itself. This third variant of neo-Kantian *objectivism of validity*, a *realist criticism* (Liebmann, Riehl), finds its most succinct formulation in Otto Liebmann's thought of an objective logic of the world, a "logic of facts (Logik der Thatsachen) [...] by means of which the objective connection of things and the course of events must harmonise throughout with the subjective logic of concrete human thought" (Liebmann, 1904, pp. 214sq.).

Consequently, one could, with some justification, assign the three 'critiques' to the three directions of Neo-Kantianism. As harmless and superficial as such a classification may seem at first, it reveals to a deeper view the common problem horizon that unites the problem consciousness of the Neo-Kantians across the school boundaries or, to put it more precisely, unites them precisely in that it draws these boundaries for them. For the common problem of all three critiques is the question of the *unity of reason*, i.e. "the unity of practical with speculative reason in a common principle" whose formulation Kant had striven for in vain in the mid-1780s in a 'Critique of Pure Practical Reason'.<sup>7</sup> If we look again at the three main directions of neo-Kantianism from this point of view, we see that they each absolutise one of the three approaches that Kant has taken since the mid-1780s in (temporary) circumvention of his aim to formulate a common principle of reason: the emphasis on the scientific facticity of the a priori in his *Prolegomena* and the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the two-world theory of the *second Critique* and the rehabilitation of the onto-theological *ordo idea* in the *Critique of Judgement*. Seen in this light, neo-Kantian objectivism of validity in its various manifestations is the result of unresolved foundational problems of transcendental philosophy that come to light in Kant's own conception of his system.

Those who blame neo-Kantianism for neglecting the foundational problems of transcendental philosophy must therefore also admit that Kant entangles these foundational problems in a highly opaque tangle of the most diverse strategies of proof. As is well known, post-Kantian transcendental philosophy is therefore fully occupied with the search for the Ariadne's thread in a tangle of metaphysical and scientific-theoretical and logical and psychological approaches. If, in view of these complexes of problems – irrespective of any systematic or ideological evaluation – one takes note as a philosophical and historical fact that apparently neither Reinhold's 'elementary philosophy' nor the subsequent idealistic (Fichte, Schelling,

<sup>6</sup> This scientific objectification of the a priori manifests itself most emphatically in Hermann Cohen's founding of his 'Ethics of Pure Will' in the 'fact' of jurisprudence; for the 'transcendental method', which for Cohen is essentially defined by reference to the 'fact' of science, "cannot be taken up for logic, but can be rejected for ethics. As logic is contained in physics, so it must be determined from physics. And as physics is rooted in logic, so law must have its root in ethics; so ethics must be determined from jurisprudence and founded in it. [...] Not only is law dependent on ethics, but ethics too must go back to the science of law, recognise the fact of a science for the continuation of the transcendental method in it" (Cohen, 1907, pp. 227sq.).

<sup>7</sup> GMS, AA IV:391; cf. KpV, AA 05:91.



Hegel) and anthropological (Fries) philosophers succeeded in a more binding foundation or a more transparent derivation of the categorial systematics, that, in addition, the natural philosophical attempts at a systematic redemption and speculative ‘suspension’ of the rationalist metaphysics of science have also been overtaken by the rapid differentiation of the globus intellectualis into individual scientific research programs, then one has formulated the essential preconditions that determined the validity-objectivist approach of New Kantianism in the 1860s. In the light of these presuppositions, and in opposition to the positivism, materialism and historicism that had in the meantime grown out of them, it could indeed appear in the middle of the 19th century as if the independence and scientificity of philosophy could only be saved by assigning to it – in recourse to the scientific-theoretical aspects of Kant’s argumentation – the “fact of exact science” as the ‘object’ peculiar to it and consequently fixing ‘idealism’ to the equation of *pure thinking* or *transcendental consciousness in general* with the *thinking of science* or with *normal* or *cultural consciousness*.

With these determinations, the labyrinthine ramifications of Kant’s architecture of reason and the dangers of speculative natural philosophy might seem equally overcome. At any rate, they could seem to have been overcome as long as contemporary European science and culture could be interpreted as objectifications of validity and values that were beyond time. With this restriction, the decisive point is already fixed from which it can be made understandable why the “directions of ‘Neo-Kantianism’ [...] sank into the mass grave of the German hopes left over from the Wilhelminian era” in the First World War (Glockner, 1958, p. 997). They perished with these hopes because, as a part of these hopes, they were carried by the conviction in the compatibility of technical-scientific civilisation and the idea of progress with the traditional humanistic educational values and because they based their belief in the value of ‘culture’ and in the meaning of their own cultural creation on this conviction. In his book *Der Sinn der gegenwärtigen Kultur* (*The Meaning of Contemporary Culture*, Leipzig 1914), published immediately before the outbreak of the First World War, the New Kantian Jonas Cohn summed up this conviction and belief in the happily chosen term “cultural piety (*Kulturfrömmigkeit*)”: for Cohn, *cultural piety* denotes the “belief (*Glaube*)” that “in cultural work we experience a meaning to our existence” not “merely as a direction, as a demand”, but that “this direction leads to a goal, that this demand can be fulfilled” (Cohn, 1914, p. 270).

The Neo-Kantian “cultural piety” was the motivating background and the legitimizing basis for a reconstructive-scientific interpretation of Kant, which understands Kant as a “Newtonian”, ties transcendental logic to the “fact” of natural science and therefore sacrifices the claim to completeness of Kant’s systematics to the “necessary thought of the progress of science” (Cohn, 1902, p. 342), but could nevertheless understand itself as a theory of ‘pure’ knowledge. Cultural piety also explains why Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert seek to determine “values” from “historical cultural objects” (Rickert, 1921, pp. 320sq.), and only against the background of an unbroken belief in the eternal value of one’s own culture we can understand Windelband’s remarks in his essay *Vom Prinzip der Moral* (*On the Principle of Morality*, 1883), according to which “we watch not only unhesitatingly but with resolute applause when European society, through the spread of its civilisation, through our missions and conquests, through firearms and firewater, one by one of the ‘savage’ societies is physically and spiritually ruined and in time driven from the face of the earth”. This consent to the physical and psychological destruction of the ‘savages’ does not, according to Windelband’s self-understanding, sanction “the brutal right of violence”, but is based on the conviction “that the victorious society represents the higher ethical value” (Windelband, 1919, p. 176).

The First World War shook this conviction and the historical and ideological experiences of the 20th century have irritated ‘cultural piety’ so much that today the term itself seems ridiculous or offensive. It is therefore easy today to be amused or morally indignant about the cultural idealism of the Wilhelminian era and related manifestations of imperialism

and social Darwinism in the ‘civilised world’ of the 19th century. On the other hand, it is difficult to expose the contemporary costumes of cultural piety as such; for example, to recall a particularly characteristic example, in the context of a comparison between Neo-Positivism and Neo-Kantianism, “it is not at all clear why exactly and precisely that which in one case is regarded as proof of philosophical honesty, indeed as a criterion for the seriousness of philosophical endeavour, [...] in the other case suddenly be a result of the Wilhelmine belief in progress, thoroughly destroyed by the First World War, even more: a philosophical renunciation” (Edel, 1993, p. 192). If it is difficult to expose the respective fashionable adaptations of cultural piety, especially since one can expect little applause this way, it is even more difficult to point out an alternative that could escape relativism and reason-defeatism. If one draws the lesson from the history of Neo-Kantianism, then this alternative would have to be sought nowhere else but in reason itself. This means that a task would have to be fulfilled that since the so-called ‘breakdown’ of German Idealism is considered almost unanimously unachievable: one would have to “develop cognition out of its original seeds” without basing this synthetic development “on any fact whatever” (Kant).

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