

THE DEPTHS OF EXPERIENCE: ON THE NEO-KANTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE CRITICAL METHOD

JACINTO PÁEZ BONIFACI

Abstract. This paper examines the distinctive features characterizing the Neo-Kantian defense of the critical method. Neo-Kantianism is distinguished by its unique interpretation of the philosophical method as a regressive procedure. Hermann Cohen and Wilhelm Windelband, prominent figures within this philosophical tradition, articulate the structure of transcendental reasoning as a movement that starts from a specific *Faktum* of cultural life and proceeds towards elucidating its conditions of possibility. Despite a broad consensus on this overarching framework, these philosophers diverge in their choice of the primary *Faktum* for analysis. Cohen focuses on the physico-mathematical sciences, while Windelband directs his attention to the foundations of history. Considering this disparity, this paper argues that the determination of the methodological *Faktum* in philosophy is not arbitrary; rather, it is informed by two distinct interpretations of the relationship between thinking and being. Furthermore, it contends that elucidating this overlooked aspect of the theory of method enables a more nuanced evaluation of the Neo-Kantian regressive methodology and its relationship with metaphysics.

Keywords: Kant, neo-Kantianism, method, Cohen, Windelband, critical idealism.

“And if Kant believed to have established the ‘critical’ method for philosophy, even today historians do not agree on what he meant by it.”
Wilhelm Windelband¹

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there has been a steady increase in interest in Neo-Kantianism, the 19th century movement advocating for a renaissance of Kantian philosophy. This surge in attention initially stemmed from concerns

Jacinto Páez Bonifaci ✉
Instituto de Filosofía, Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago de Chile
Instituto de Filosofía, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina
e-mail: jacinto.paez@mail.udp.cl

¹ Wilhelm Windelband, *Präludien. Aufsätze und Reden zur Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte*, Jörn Born, Sebastian Luft (eds.), Hamburg, Meiner, 2021, p. 17 (my translation).

regarding historical justice. Prevailing accounts of 19th Century philosophy, which historically marginalized Neo-Kantianism, are now recognized as incomplete representations of the period. These prevailing narratives, often centered around the zenith of philosophy's institutionalization, overlook the significant influence of the Neo-Kantian movement within German universities. Thus, while the philosophical significance of Neo-Kantianism remains a topic of debate, contemporary historiography has solidified the characterization of the period spanning from 1860 to 1918 as the "era of Neo-Kantianism"².

Considering the burgeoning interest in Neo-Kantianism within current scholarship, this paper undertakes an investigation into the distinct characteristics of the Neo-Kantian defense of the critical or transcendental method advanced by Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) and Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915). These two authors are indeed the "founding fathers" of the two central schools of Neo-Kantianism, namely, the Marburg School and the Baden School³.

The article is structured as follows. The first section explores why the correct interpretation of the philosophical method was a pivotal concern for the Neo-Kantians. The second section explores the distinction between progressive and regressive interpretations of the critical method, grounding the discussion in Kant's own methodology. Sections three and four analyze the specific approaches of Cohen and Windelband to the critical method: Cohen's focus on the physico-mathematical sciences contrasts with Windelband's examination of the foundations of history. While both, Cohen and Windelband, adhere to a regressive method, their motivations for doing so differ significantly. The final section elucidates how this disparity reflects two competing interpretations of the essence of transcendental idealism. By doing so, this investigation shows that their divergence is not arbitrary but rather rooted in conflicting interpretations of the relationship between thinking and being.

Overall, the paper demonstrates that the Neo-Kantian defense of the critical method is intricately tied to broader philosophical questions regarding basic metaphysical commitments of Cohen and Windelband.

1. THE PROBLEM OF METHOD

The problem of delineating a legitimate philosophical method lies at the core of what scholars have termed the "identity crisis of philosophy"⁴. This crisis-

² Sebastian Luft (ed), *The Neo-Kantian Reader*, London, Routledge, 2015, p. xxi.

³ For a profil of Neo-Kantianism in general, I refer the reader to Andrzej Noraz, *Geschichte des Neukantianismus*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2020; especially the first chapter, "Characterization of Neo-Kantianism".

⁴ Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland 1831–1933*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1983, p. 11; Frederick Beiser, *After Hegel. German Philosophy 1780–1918*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 35. Beyond the position evident in the specialized literature, Kuno Fischer's 1860 book can be taken as evidence of this crisis and the associated diagnosis. See, for instance, Kuno Fischer, *Kants Lehre und die Grundlagen seiner Lehre*, Mannheim, 1860, p. 81.

consciousness stems from two different sources: philosophy's perceived lack of a definitive object of inquiry and a distinct research methodology.

The absence of a clear object arose from the continual advancement of empirical sciences. As sciences progressed, they started challenging the long-standing claims of metaphysics to attain a comprehensive understanding of the totality of the world. Instead, empirical sciences advocated for a fragmented and compartmentalized approach to knowledge. This process, initiated by physics and furthered by emerging disciplines during the nineteenth-century such as experimental psychology and history, gradually eroded the domains traditionally associated with metaphysics. By the mid-nineteenth century, philosophical inquiry found itself without exclusive access to any distinct sphere of the world.

A further problem was the challenge of defining the philosophical method. A potential solution to avoid conflict with empirical sciences was to assert that philosophers possessed a unique and irreducible mode of contemplating things, namely, a distinct method. By the mid-nineteenth century, there were only two primary contenders for fulfilling this role: the empirical and the dialectical methods⁵. However, both alternatives posed problems for nineteenth-century philosophers.

The empirical method had undeniably demonstrated its success but embracing it risked aligning philosophy too closely with the psychological investigations of the mind, thus undermining philosophy's autonomy. Conversely, the dialectical method was considered as exclusively belonging to philosophy, but its conclusions failed to satisfy. Indeed, one of the main reasons behind philosophy's crisis was the evident discrepancy between the theoretical insights derived from the dialectical method and the empirical findings obtained through experimental practices⁶.

As it is apparent, prior to the consolidation of the Neo-Kantian movement in German academia, philosophical inquiry faced significant challenges.

For Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) and Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915), the founding figures of the leading schools of Neo-Kantianism, the solution to philosophy's 'identity crisis' is found in Kant's revolutionary transformation of traditional metaphysics into a metaphysics of knowledge⁷. They argued that the critical or transcendental method, as articulated in the works of Immanuel Kant, represented a third, previously overlooked alternative to the empirical and the dialectical methods⁸.

⁵ Wilhelm Windelband, "Die philosophischen Richtungen der Gegenwart", in E. von Aster (ed.), *Grosse Denker. Band II*, Leipzig, Quelle und Meyer, 1911, p. 363; F. Beiser, *After Hegel. German Philosophy 1780–1918*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 16.

⁶ This is the reason why "after 1840, there was scarcely any German philosopher of importance who would have openly declared that he was Hegelian", in Nicolai Milkov, *Hermann Lotze's Influence on Twentieth Century Philosophy*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2023, p. 4.

⁷ Wilhelm Windelband, *Präludien*, ed. cit., p. 24.

⁸ The term 'transcendental method' was not minted by Kant. Windelband opts for the adjective 'critical', while Cohen prefers the denomination 'transcendental' for the methodological procedure of the critique of knowledge. I employ the terms interchangeably throughout this text.

The Kantian methodology was not strictly adhered to in its entirety. Windelband, for instance, argued that even the father of critical philosophy failed to explicate comprehensively the precise nature of his argumentative approach: “Kant himself was to blame for the fact that the new concept of apriority was very soon reduced to the old notion of psychological priority, thus causing the most valuable aspect of his creation to be misunderstood.”⁹ Kant’s innovative methodology remained closely aligned, in its phrasing, with the empirical method. Embedded in psychological terminology, Kant’s mode of exposition posed an obstacle to fully apprehending the genuine significance of the transcendental standpoint. Nevertheless, what is pertinent to note concerning this evaluation is that, according to these Neo-Kantians, the authentic elucidation of Kant’s critical or transcendental methodology constituted a pivotal endeavour for safeguarding the future of philosophy. The discussion, therefore, surpassed the boundaries of the history of philosophy, acquiring a truly systematic character.

As we have seen, the ‘crisis’ diagnosis and the critical assessment of the merits and drawbacks of Kant’s methodological approach were common focal points within the frameworks of Cohen and Windelband. Specifically, they endeavored to reinterpret Kant’s philosophical methodology by reconceptualizing the interplay between philosophy and empirical sciences. As we will see in each specific case, Cohen and Windelband repositioned the critical method as a quest to delve into the depths of empirical experience, advocating an interpretation that construed the critical method as a regressive inquiry from the conditioned to its conditions of possibility. But to understand the nature of this regressive inquiry, and to what extent the Neo-Kantians innovated with their interpretation, it is necessary to take a detour through the Neo-Kantian distinction between a progressive exposition and a regressive exposition.

2. THE KANTIAN STARTING POINT

Kant’s initial exploration into methodological issues occurs in his *Inquiry*, published in 1764¹⁰. The primary objective of this pre-critical work is to ascertain the attainable level of certainty in philosophical studies.

Kant’s analysis is bifurcated into negative and positive aspects. On the negative side, Kant elucidates the inherent limitations of extending the mathematical

⁹ W. Windelband, *Präludien*, ed. cit., p. 353 (my translation).

¹⁰ *Untersuchung über die Deutlichkeit der Grundsätze der natürlichen Theologie und der Moral* [Inquiry concerning the distinctness of the principles of natural theology and morality, being an answer to the question proposed for consideration by the Berlin Royal Academy of Science for the year 1763]. A detailed and penetrating analysis of the Kantian conception of philosophical method throughout the pre-critical period can be found in Brigitte Falkenburg, *Kant’s Cosmology. From the Pre-Critical System to the Antinomy of Pure Reason*, Cham, Springer, 2020.

method to philosophical reasoning¹¹. By articulating the inadequacy of this method, Kant presents a direct counterargument to the practices of dogmatic philosophers. Conversely, on the positive side, Kant's *Inquiry* delineates the fundamental principles of the progressive methodology that forms the basis of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Kant's rejection of the mathematical method revolves around the argumentative role of definitions. Within mathematics, definitions serve as the unquestioned starting point. Mathematicians formulate general concepts through the "arbitrary combination" of other, less general concepts¹². Through this combination, they construct their objects, constrained solely by the compatibility of the concepts involved. Consequently, mathematical definitions are considered real definitions¹³; they enable mathematicians to generate their own objects. While dogmatic philosophers emulate mathematicians by establishing a set of definitions at the outset of their systems, equating this practice with mathematics proves unwarranted. This is because philosophy's endeavour to comprehend reality encounters inherent challenges in employing arbitrary combinations of concepts. Philosophical objects are significantly more complex than those in mathematics. Furthermore, philosophy lacks the auxiliary tools of mathematics and the ability to formulate a set of self-evident principles to serve as the foundation of its system.

Rather than employing arbitrary definitions, philosophical inquiry operates under the premise that "the concept of a thing is always given, albeit confusedly or in an insufficiently determinate fashion"¹⁴. The principal aim of philosophy is to undertake an analysis of these inherent concepts in order to attain a "complete and determinate" representation.¹⁵ Philosophical investigation seeks to meticulously scrutinize this concept, disentangling its components and discerning which elements are foundational and which are merely derivative aspects of the original concept. The initial step in philosophical research involves isolating, from the given concept, those aspects that can be ascertained with certainty.¹⁶ Although these certainties may be minute, they serve as the foundation for more intricate judgments. Thus, the prescribed method entails commencing with a complex and ambiguous concept and systematically reducing it to its fundamental, certain elements. The objective of this process is to reconstruct the compound concept, but this time in the form of a systematically articulated structure. While the original

¹¹As this often-quoted passage neatly expresses: "one can say with Bishop Warburton that nothing has been more damaging to philosophy than mathematics, and in particular the *imitation* of its method in contexts where it cannot possibly be employed", in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 256.

¹²Imm. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, ed. cit., p. 248.

¹³*Ibidem.*, p. 254.

¹⁴*Ibidem.*, p. 248. Kant also claims: "the business of metaphysics is actually the analysis of confused cognitions" (*Ibidem.*, p. 262).

¹⁵*Ibidem.*, p. 250.

¹⁶*Ibidem.*, p. 258.

concept may be obscure and indistinct, the concept elaborated methodically adheres to the “well-established rules” of reason¹⁷.

These methodological directives outlined in the *Inquiry* anticipate the approach Kant adopts in the *Critique of Pure Reason*¹⁸. Kant applies the same methodological principles in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: decomposing, isolating, and integrating the constituent elements of the initially given concept to establish a body of philosophical knowledge¹⁹. The culmination of this process involves the formulation of a comprehensive synthesis aimed at transforming the initial concept into a coherent and comprehensive whole. Although this final synthesis resembles a definition, it never attains the status of a perfect mathematical definition. Interestingly, while there is consensus regarding the characteristic features of Kant’s methodology, it does not preclude vigorous debates concerning the specific starting point of the first critique²⁰.

Our subsequent point of reference, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will be Able to Present Itself as a Science*, presents an alternative avenue for philosophers. In this text, the earlier *Critique of Pure Reason* is described as employing a progressive or synthetic methodology, which directly engages with the origins of a priori knowledge. In the *Critique*, the system of pure reason is established solely through recourse to pure reason. However, in the *Prolegomena*, Kant adopts a divergent approach:

¹⁷ Imm. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, ed. cit., p. 259. Abandoning the model of mathematics, Kant turns his gaze towards natural sciences, praising the Newtonian method as the true reference for developing the method of metaphysics. In the context of his parallelism between the method of Newton and his own proposal for metaphysics, Kant reasserts the steps that I have described: “Likewise in metaphysics: by means of certain inner experience, that is to say, by means of an immediate and self-evident inner consciousness, seek out those characteristic marks which are certainly to be found in the concept of any general property. And even if you are not acquainted with the complete essence of the thing, you can still safely employ those characteristic marks to infer a great deal from them about the thing in question” (*ibidem*). For further analysis of Kant’s comparison with the Newtonian method, see Robert Di Salle, “The Transcendental Method from Newton to Kant”, in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 44 (3), 2013, pp. 448–456; Brigitte Falkenburg, *Kant’s Cosmology. From the Pre-Critical System to the Antinomy of Pure Reason*, Springer, Cham, 2020 (pp. 55, 63).

¹⁸ Mario Caimi, “Application of the Doctrine of Method in the critical examination of reason”, in *Studia Kantiana*, 13, 2012, p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 8.

²⁰ Mario Caimi defends that the given concept is the concept of “pure speculative reason” (Mario Caimi, “Application of the Doctrine of Method in the critical examination of reason”, ed. cit., p. 9.) and the conclusion of the methodical path of the first critique is the elaboration of the concept of “philosophy of pure reason”. Other interpreters defend that the starting point of the first critique is the concept of experience or experience in general. Melissa Merritt offers an overarching exposition describing three alternative presentations of the same starting point: experience in general, the faculty of reason, and the thesis of the heterogeneity between sensibility and understanding. See Melissa Merritt, “Science and the Synthetic Method of the *Critique of Pure Reason*”, in *The Review of Metaphysics*, 59 (3), 2006, p. 530; and Melissa Merritt, “Analysis in the *Critique of Pure Reason*”, in *Kantian Review*, 12 (1), 2007, p. 60.

Prolegomena should by contrast [to the *Critique of Pure Reason*] be preparatory exercises ... They must therefore rely on something already known to be dependable, from which we can go forward with confidence and ascend to the sources, which are not yet known, and whose discovery not only will explain what is known already, but will also exhibit an area with many cognitions that all arise from these same sources.²¹

The methodology employed in the *Prolegomena* is delineated as ‘regressive’, as it endeavours to establish the foundational underpinnings of previously known concepts by scrutinizing their origins, specifically, their conditions of possibility²². Moreover, the initial standpoint in the *Prolegomena* is comparatively less contentious than that of the *First Critique*, as the former explicitly aligns itself with concrete domains: mathematics, natural sciences, and the inherent inclination of reason towards metaphysics. Given our possession of mathematical knowledge and awareness of synthetic a priori judgments within mathematics, it is legitimate to inquire into the possibility of such judgments. The same applies for natural sciences. Thus, metaphorically speaking, the philosopher plumbs the depths of experience²³.

For Kant, the distinction between the progressive approach of the *Critique* and the regressive approach of the *Prolegomena* mirrors the difference between a method of discovery and a method of exposition²⁴. “Progressive” and “regressive” denote two distinct modes of articulating the same theoretical framework²⁵. The *Prolegomena* provides a didactic-oriented presentation that sidesteps the intricacies of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction or the chapter on the Schematism. However, it is worth noting that this didactic exposition is contingent upon the outcomes achieved in these more subtle arguments. In this vein, Melissa Merritt persuasively argues that this dependence stems from the notion that only the progressive method can justify the scientific character of philosophy: “Kant thinks that only a genuine science, the insights of which rest on the discovery of a rational principle, could provide the sort of completeness in its results that would be necessary for this [Kant’s own] foundational project to be achieved.”²⁶ Consequently, the *Critique* is underpinned by a unifying principle absent in the exposition of the *Prolegomena*²⁷.

²¹ Imm. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 70.

²² *Ibidem.*, p. 73.

²³ *Ibidem.*, p. 161.

²⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 58.

²⁵ Brigitte Falkenburg, “On Method: The Fact of Science and the Distinction between Natural Sciences and the Humanities”, in *Kant Yearbook*, 12, 2020, p. 4.

²⁶ Melissa Merritt, “Science and the Synthetic Method of the *Critique of Pure Reason*”, ed. cit., p. 522.

²⁷ Melissa Merritt, “Analysis in the *Critique of Pure Reason*”, ed. cit., p. 64.

Looking ahead to the content of the subsequent sections, the Neo-Kantian interpretation of the critical method fundamentally shifts the argumentative emphasis of the progressive and regressive procedures²⁸.

A clear example of this inversion is found in Bruno Bauch's comprehensive analysis of the transcendental method²⁹. In stark contrast to the close reading offered by contemporary Kantian scholars, Bauch does not begin his exposition with references to the *Inquiry* or to the *Transcendental Doctrine of Method*. He kicks off with the following abstract characterization:

The transcendental question is thus directed to the 'a priori reasons of the possibility of experience'. But this is the problem of the doctrine of knowledge [Erkenntnislehre] as a philosophical discipline ... The method, which is determined to solve the transcendental problem in the transcendental-philosophical doctrine of knowledge [Erkenntnislehre], is therefore itself called transcendental method.³⁰

The transcendental method interrogates the grounds (Gründe) of experience, thereby providing its foundation (Begründung). Bauch distinguishes between mere cognition (Wissen) and grounded cognition (Wissenschaft), asserting that the method aims to determine what constitutes certain cognitions as grounded, i.e., scientific. This emphasis on science and its underpinnings aligns Bauch's interpretation closely with the formulations found in the *Prolegomena*. The method begins with the actual character of experience, as exemplified in mathematics and the natural sciences, and progresses toward its grounds, namely, the conditions of possibility of experience³¹.

Scholarly discourse has highlighted the methodological precedence of the regressive approach as a core element of Neo-Kantianism. It is acknowledged that Neo-Kantian interpretations, such as those advocated by Bruno Bauch, simplify Kant's multifaceted exposition of the philosophical method³². Additionally, there is

²⁸ Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 2nd edition, Berlin, Dümmler, 1885, p. 658; Lois Marie Rendl, "Zu Hermann Cohens Reduktion der 'transzendentalen Methode' auf die 'regressive Lehrart' der *Prolegomena*", in Christian Dämbock (ed.), *Philosophie und Wissenschaft bei Hermann Cohen/Philosophy and Science in Hermann Cohen*, Cham, Springer, pp. 137–138.

²⁹ Bruno Bauch, *Immanuel Kant*, Berlin and Leipzig, Göschen'sche Verlagshandlung, 1917. It is interesting to consider Bauch, as he can be seen as a representative of mature Neo-Kantianism. In this text, we aim to examine the transition from the Kantian self-interpretation of the philosophical method to Bauch's simplified position on the transcendental method, which he presents in purely regressive terms.

³⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 130 (my translation).

³¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 131.

³² It is possible to find defenders of this reading of Kantian philosophy as resting on "good textual support in the *Critique* and throughout Kant's literary corpus" (Alan Richardson, "'The Fact of Science' and Critique of Knowledge: Exact Science as Problem and Resource in Marburg Neo-Kantianism", in Michael Friedman, Alfred Nordmann (eds.), *The Kantian Legacy in Nineteenth-Century Science*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2006, p. 213).

a general trend among interpreters regarding Kant's methodology, suggesting the integration of analytic and synthetic procedures into a cohesive argument³³. However, the exegetical trajectory favoured by the Neo-Kantians exhibits a pronounced systematic component. According to Neo-Kantian thinkers, empirical scientific practice involves implicit operations of reason that remain undisclosed to scientists but are revealed through specific transcendental-philosophical analyses³⁴. Thus, the regressive procedure ensures a profound alignment between philosophy and science, which was imperative to address philosophy's identity crisis³⁵.

Nonetheless, despite the shared commitments of the Neo-Kantians, it is important to acknowledge that, while pursuing the concrete details of their philosophical agendas, Cohen and Windelband not only advanced divergent but conflicting interpretations of this method³⁶. Their perspectives diverge significantly in their identification of the appropriate point of departure for philosophical analysis. In other words, these Neo-Kantians diverge in their determinations of the nature of experience and the methodology for its examination. For Cohen, experience is primarily identified with the domain of the physico-mathematical sciences, whereas for Windelband, experience is situated within the realm of historical inquiry³⁷.

The following two sections of this paper aim to present in isolation the perspectives of Cohen and Windelband regarding the method of philosophy. Additionally, these sections will highlight how these interpretations of the method are further connected to an underlying metaphysical thesis.

³³ Brigitte Falkenburg, "On Method", ed. cit., p. 4; and Brigitte Falkenburg, *Kant's Cosmology*, ed. cit., p. 253.

³⁴ Andrea Staiti, *Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology. Nature, Spirit, and Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 20.

³⁵ A confirmation of this claim can be found in Paul Natorp, *Philosophie. Ihr Problem und ihre Probleme*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1911, pp. 5–6.

³⁶ Brigitte Falkenburg, "On Method", ed. cit., p. 2.

³⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge. Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950, p. 11. Jeremy Heis (author of the entry on Neo-Kantianism in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*) traces a comparison between the two schools of Neo-Kantianism in a similar way: "In particular, Marburg Neo-Kantians believed that some of the categories and principles that Kant identified were relative to the scientific theories of Kant's day, and that the categories and principles could change as scientists develop new empirical theories. Southwest Neo-Kantians, on the other hand, were keen to argue that history is just as much a science as mathematical physics, and they thought that Kant's critical project had to be extended in order to identify the a priori elements in history" (see Jeremy Heiss, "Neo-Kantianism", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/neo-kantianism/>>.). This way of distinguishing the philosophical programs of the Marburg and Baden schools is recurrent in the specialized literature.

3. TRANSCENDENTAL METHOD AND THE CRITIQUE OF KNOWLEDGE

Multiple interpretations of Hermann Cohen's transcendental method align with the pattern outlined in the previous sections³⁸. His methodological starting point is associated with the domain of science, while the philosophical endeavor is framed as a regressive inquiry into the conditions underlying this specific domain³⁹.

Cohen's response to the 'identity crisis' is encapsulated within the concept of 'critique of knowledge' [Erkenntniskritik]⁴⁰. This critique seeks to illuminate the scientific nature of knowledge itself⁴¹. By shifting from the development of a theory of knowledge to its critique, Cohen effectively precludes any misinterpretation of philosophy as a psychological inquiry concerned with analyzing cognitive faculties⁴².

The core of this critique of knowledge revolves around the idea of a *Faktum* of science:

If I take cognition not as a kind and manner of consciousness, but as a *fact*, which came about in *science* and continues to complete itself *on given foundations*, then the investigation no longer refers to a still subjective fact, but to an objectively given state of affairs, however much these may multiply, [that is] grounded in principles; not on the process and apparatus of cognition, but on the yield of this, science. The question is immediately and unambiguously

³⁸ Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1997, p. 18; Lois Marie Rendl, "Zu Hermann Cohens Reduktion der 'transzendentalen Methode' auf die 'regressive Lehrart' der *Prolegomena*" ed. cit.; Brigitte Falkenburg, "On Method", ed. cit., p. 3.

³⁹ Paul Natorp succinctly defends this two-step formulation of the transcendental method in his seminal conference "Kant and the Marburg School": "The transcendental method comprises two essential parts. The first is the secure reference back to current, historically verifiable facts of science, morals, art and religion, given that philosophy does not wish to breath in the 'airless space' of pure thought ... And now, for the second, the requirement of the transcendental method: verifying the basis of the 'possibility' of the fact and therewith its 'warrant', i.e., to show that law's foundation, to show the unity of logos or reason in all constructive acts of culture, and to uncover its pure form" (Paul Natorp, "Kant and the Marburg School", in Sebastian Luft (ed.), *The Neo-Kantian Reader*, London, Routledge, 2015, 182); see also Konstantin Pollock, "The Transcendental Method", in Paul Guyer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 367. The evident benefit of this wording rests in its power of synthesis, but it merely represents an orienting model in view of Cohen's concrete handling of the transcendental method.

⁴⁰ Hermann Cohen, *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte: ein Kapitel zur Grundlegung der Erkenntniskritik*, Berlin, Dümmler, 1883, p. 6; Alan Richardson, "'The Fact of Science' and *Critique of Knowledge*", ed. cit., p. 217; Konstantin Pollock, "The Transcendental Method", ed. cit., p. 363.

⁴¹ Hermann Cohen, *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*, ed. cit., p. 7.

⁴² See as well Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, 3ed. Edition, Berlin, Bruno Cassirer, 1922, p. 2.

suggested: from *which presuppositions* of this scientific state of affairs does its certainty derive?⁴³

Knowledge possesses both a subjective and an objective dimension, represented respectively by the process through which knowledge arises within a subjective consciousness and by the concrete outcomes of this process⁴⁴. These outcomes, however, are not subjective, but rather objective structures. The critique of knowledge, therefore, elucidates these structures in terms of their ideal composition, rather than their actual genesis⁴⁵.

In this context, the transcendental method serves as a demonstration of the cognitive principles that constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for the establishment and philosophical justification of the fact of science. Moreover, insofar as these principles can be shown to function as a formal condition of experience, they will be characterized by a distinct kind of apriority—that is, they will be a priori in a transcendental sense⁴⁶.

Cohen argues that his approach to critical inquiry is not innovative but rather intricately connected to the theoretical framework of Kantian philosophy. In his view, Kant understood science primarily through the paradigm of Newtonian mechanics. As a result, Kant's goal in theoretical philosophy was to clarify the foundations of Newtonian science⁴⁷. By forging a closer connection between philosophy and the sciences, Cohen revisits key issues concerning the relationship between the methodologies presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomena*. For this reason, the initial step in developing a critique of knowledge requires both a historical and systematic presentation, with the starting point

⁴³ Hermann Cohen, *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*, ed. cit., p. 5 (the quotation in English is taken from Sebastian Luft (ed.), *The Neo-Kantian Reader*, ed. cit., pp. 103–104). See also Hermann Cohen, *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*, p. 104; Hermann Cohen, *Kants Begründung der Ethik*, Berlin, Dümmler, 1877, p. 24; Gert Edel, *Von der Vernunftkritik zur Erkenntnislogik*, Waldkirch, Edition Gorz, pp. 14–15.

⁴⁴ Hermann Cohen, *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*, ed. cit., p. 6.

⁴⁵ In *The Logic of Pure Knowledge*, Cohen offers a more laconic expression to emphasize the difference between the psychologic and logic standpoints: “The thinking of logic is the thinking of science”, in Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, ed. cit., p. 19.

⁴⁶ “The elements of consciousness must function as the foundations of science, and the presuppositions of science must be recognized as the fundamental features of cognitive consciousness. The metaphysical a priori must be transformed into the transcendental a priori.” (Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, ed. cit., p. 78) and “These principles make this science a science and explain its continuous development.” (Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, ed. cit., p. 9).

⁴⁷ Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, ed. cit., pp. 55, 67. Another passage in the same direction states: “Just as Newton's method became clear to him [to Kant] as the system of methods and thus as the system of the world, so did his fluctuating sense of the word “metaphysics” change. It became a critique, primarily a critique of the system of methods, the principles of Newton. ... He [Kant] initially refrained from all moral philosophy and theology, and thus also from all rational psychology, and focused metaphysics exclusively on the problem of Newton's system of principles.” (Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, ed. cit., p. 8).

grounded in science itself. This is the task Cohen undertakes in *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*⁴⁸.

Cohen initially defines the “fact of science” in the context of evaluating the strengths of Newtonian science: “Since Newton, there has existed a science built on principles, conscious of its foundations and presuppositions, and which proceeds according to the mathematical method.”⁴⁹ In this framework, the fact of science is not simply a scientific theory; it also includes a reflective dimension, characterized by an awareness of science’s underlying principles. While scientists may not engage in the philosophical examination of their concepts, these concepts inherently reference philosophical thought⁵⁰. Moreover, as will be shown, this reflective dimension is closely tied to the recognition of the crucial role that mathematics plays in shaping this fact.

In addition to referencing the various layers within the structure of the fact of science, Newtonian science is not seen as an isolated entity but rather as a pivotal step in a broader progression. The fact of science is intertwined with the historical development of modern sciences, beginning with Galileo, and is embedded in a narrative of scientific progress. The transcendental method does not arbitrarily dissect the development of sciences by selecting a specific scientific doctrine as its subject of analysis⁵¹. Instead, the fact itself is the ongoing process through which modern science has acquired the defining characteristics articulated in the earlier quotation about Newton. The method’s purpose is to understand the validity and underlying assumptions of this process. This is why Cohen’s treatment of the transcendental method as a regressive procedure cannot be separated from his account of the history of modern epistemology and the evolution of modern

⁴⁸ On the general interpretation of Cohen’s *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*, see Thomas Mormann and Mikhail Katz, “Infinitesimals as an issue of neo-Kantian philosophy of science”, in *Hopos: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science*, (2), 2010, pp. 236–280; Marco Giovanelli, “Hermann Cohen’s *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode*: The history of an unsuccessful book”, in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 58, 2016, pp. 9–23; and Scott Edgar, “Hermann Cohen’s Principle of the Infinitesimal Method: A Defense”, in *Hopos: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science*, 10 (2), 2020, pp. 440–470.

⁴⁹ Hermann Cohen, *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*, ed. cit., p. 7 (quotation in English taken from Sebastian Luft (ed.), *The Neo-Kantian Reader*, ed. cit., p. 105). Cohen repeats this statement in his *Logic*: “The mathematical natural sciences only achieved a systematic approach to their principles and methods through Newton.”, in Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, ed. cit., p. 19.

⁵⁰ Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, ed. cit., p. 68.

⁵¹ It has been suggested that, under a different scientific paradigm, philosophy would need to reinitiate its regressive analysis, given the lack of a unifying principle. Some scholars have highlighted the apparent contingency introduced by this shift in methodology. However, this interpretation fails to recognize the dynamic nature of Cohen’s philosophical approach, which consistently intertwines historical and systematic reflection. This interplay effectively counters the perceived contingency of the transcendental method.

sciences. His ‘chapter’ on the critique of knowledge is an interpretation not only of science but also of its history.

Understanding Cohen’s interpretation of the transcendental method, particularly within the domain of theoretical philosophy, requires a precise articulation of the tripartite relationship among the principles of science, their philosophical underpinnings, and the mathematical framework utilized in scientific inquiry. In this context, the phrase “delving into the depths of experience,” as articulated in Kant’s *Prolegomena*, acquires a distinct meaning that emerges from the interdependence of philosophy, natural sciences, and mathematics. Given that the objectivity of scientific objects is determined by their idealization through geometrical means, calculus becomes essential to the formation of the object of knowledge. Therefore, the study of mathematics serves as a foundational step in any inquiry into the scientific nature of knowledge.

In Cohen’s interpretation of the fact of science, particularly in his work on the infinitesimal method, the concept of continuity emerges as central. Continuity is a multifaceted concept with significant implications in mathematics, science, and philosophy. For this discussion, the most pertinent interpretation of continuity is as a property of scientific consciousness – a fundamental law of thought, as Cohen articulates. He explains that “continuity refers to a general characteristic of consciousness, akin to identity. It is, therefore, a specific expression of the general law of unity of consciousness”⁵².

As a general law of consciousness, continuity reveals the generation of the real within the ideal. Let us revisit the philosophical point that Cohen aims to develop. The significant transformation in physics lies in its adoption of the mathematical method and, with it, the hypothesis of the infinite. In mathematics, Cohen asserts that “continuous unity must be conceived as the origin. The infinite must be distinguished from the finite to allow the finite to be generated from it”⁵³. This unity, insofar as it contains infinity within itself, is no longer discrete but continuous determination. The determination of the finite, therefore, must be derived from the infinite⁵⁴. Consequently, the concept of the infinite was tasked with the discovery of what exists. For instance, through the analysis of movement, a concept that requires for its understanding the reference to the infinitesimal, concepts such as mass and force were to be determined. In this mathematical creation of movement Cohen perceives the triumph or “sovereignty” of thought. Regarding the creative relationship between the ideal and the real, Cohen observes:

⁵² Hermann Cohen, *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*, ed. cit., p. 35.

⁵³ *Ibidem.*, p. 32.

⁵⁴ Hermann Cohen, *Logik*, ed. cit., p. 32.

“The concept of continuity was already addressed by the Eleatics; it belongs to the chain of considerations that derive being from thinking.”⁵⁵

Cohen’s aim is to demonstrate that what is given in experience – the fact of science – is not external to thought but rather an intellectual construct whose objectivity depends on the concept of the infinitesimal. The philosophical problem of the interpretation of the infinitesimals has precisely to do with the problem of reality and ideality⁵⁶.

Cohen’s interpretation of the infinitesimal serves as the cornerstone that upholds his theoretical philosophy, that is, his *Logic of Pure Knowledge*⁵⁷. In his *Logic*, Cohen not only replicates the methodological model he attributes to Immanuel Kant but also significantly departs from Kant’s content while employing his method⁵⁸. Cohen argues that Kant’s fundamental error lies in positing that thought originates from something external to itself⁵⁹. For Kant, the synthesis of thought necessarily correlates with and references a multiplicity that is externally ‘given’ – specifically, in the form of heterogeneous intuition. In contrast, the creative capacity of thought, as demonstrated in mathematical procedures, motivates a conception that diverges from Kantian synthesis⁶⁰. Cohen thus asserts that it is possible to commence not with intuition but directly with thought, or pure logic. Thought must have no origin outside itself if its purity is to remain absolute and untainted. Pure thought, operating autonomously, must generate pure knowledge⁶¹. Therefore, knowledge, rather than being merely a synthesis, manifests itself as creation.

⁵⁵ Hermann Cohen, *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*, ed. cit., p. 34. Afterwards, Cohen extends this analysis to Leibniz’s interpretation of calculus, noting: “Now he (Leibniz) gains the self-evident understanding of his principle of continuity as a realizing principle, which accomplishes this realization through the infinitesimal, where the connection between being and thinking, between thing and idea, is established and grounded.” (*Ibidem.*, p. 58).

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*, p. 70. Later, in Cohen’s *Logik*, his position regarding this matter is expressed more succinctly: “has logic even become fully aware of its true task? The principle of the infinite offers a clear answer to this question. Has the principle of the infinitesimal method found its rightful central place in logic? If this question cannot be answered affirmatively, then the preceding question must be answered negatively, and it would be established that logic has missed its true task – the fundamental problem that the new science has presented to it.” (Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, ed. cit., p. 34).

⁵⁷ Hernán Pringe, “Cohen’s *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* and Cassirer’s *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*”, in *Kant Yearbook*, 12, 2020, p. 139. Regarding the difference between the *Logic* and the book on the infinitesimal calculus: “We begin anew here. This means that we once again position ourselves on the foundation of the principles of mathematical natural science. They are to be demonstrated anew as pure knowledge and rediscovered within the framework of logical reason.” (Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, ed. cit., p. 11).

⁵⁸ A detailed account on how Cohen’s theoretical philosophy would imply a radical transformation of Kant’s copernican revolution can be found in Hernán Pringe, “Cohen’s *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* and Cassirer’s *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*”, ed. cit., pp. 137–168.

⁵⁹ H. Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, ed. cit., p. 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 27.

⁶¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 13.

Creation also serves as a metaphor for characterizing thought. Cohen finds this metaphor valuable for highlighting two essential aspects of thought: first, creation involves the generation of unity, which must also extend to the concept of multiplicity, and second, creation itself is the product of creation. In the realm of thought, the focus is not on producing a thought as a finished object, considered separately from the act of thinking; rather, thought itself is both the aim and the object of its activity. This activity does not transform into a distinct object; it does not exist outside of itself. Instead, the activity itself constitutes the thought, and thought is nothing more than the act of thinking.

Cohen's interpretation of transcendental idealism offers a distinctive perspective on the method of philosophy. According to this interpretation, transcendental philosophy is not aimed at critiquing metaphysics or constructing a metaphysical system. Despite this, Cohen's critique of science contains a significant metaphysical component. His theoretical philosophy extends beyond merely reducing transcendental philosophy to a meta-theory of the exact sciences⁶². Instead, it represents a metaphysically robust exploration of the productive relationship between thought and being. Paradoxically, Cohen's approach to the sciences addresses the broader fate of philosophical idealism itself⁶³.

4. CRITICAL METHOD AND THE COURSE OF HISTORY

Like Cohen, Windelband begins his discussion on philosophical methodology by examining the limitations of Kant's seminal proposal. Both philosophers employ regressive arguments as a foundational aspect of their transcendental proofs. However, while Cohen's methodology has been more clearly defined, scholars have struggled to pinpoint the distinctive features of Windelband's approach.

For Windelband, the starting point of investigation – where the regressive method must be applied – is rooted in the historical sciences. He aims to provide a critique of historical reason, which he sees as essential for establishing the scientific validity of history. In this context, the objectivity of the 'historical' object is understood as manifesting through specific rational norms or normative ideas. Thus, Windelband's project begins with a reflective analysis of the historical sciences to uncover the rational principles that underlie and shape history itself. However, the specialized literature shows significant disagreement regarding the validity of this interpretation.

Brigitte Falkenburg criticizes Windelband for his failure to adequately explain the functioning of his method, noting that he "gives no methodological rules on how to follow or get closer to the normative ideas of what is true, good, or

⁶² Brigitte Falkenburg, "On Method", ed. cit., p. 7. Cf. Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, ed. cit., p. 37.

⁶³ H. Cohen, *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*, ed. cit., p. 6.

beautiful”⁶⁴. Similarly, Katherina Kinzel observes that “Windelband never carried out the actual task of finding normative contents by historical means”⁶⁵. Without a concrete example demonstrating how the transition from the conditioned (history) to its condition of possibility (rational norms, or values in Windelband’s terminology) can be realized, Windelband’s method remains a mere proposal.

Adding to the critique, Frederick Beiser introduces another layer of ambiguity by noting that Windelband’s concept of a *factum* of science translates into a methodological *organon* of philosophy. Beiser points out that “Windelband goes out of his way to say that the organon of the critical philosophy should be history rather than psychology, though his reasons for this preference are rather obscure.”⁶⁶ This observation suggests that, while Windelband introduces the idea of an *organon* of philosophy instead of a *factum* of the sciences, he does not clearly justify his choice of history as the guiding thread over other potential candidates.

In all three assessments, the relationship between history and philosophical method emerges as a central yet unresolved issue in interpreting Windelband’s Neo-Kantianism. The critical method, as developed by Windelband, is most clearly outlined in his essay “Critical or Genetic Method?” and will serve as the primary focus of our analysis. However, the metaphysical implications of Windelband’s interpretation of this method also require an examination of his final published work, *Introduction to Philosophy* (1914).

As suggested by the title “Critical or Genetic Method?” the essay grapples with the interpretation of a fundamental dichotomy. Given the hypothesis that the Neo-Kantian method generally follows a regressive structure, beginning with experience itself, it is essential to acknowledge that experience plays a role in both methods. However, each method conceptualizes experience differently. The critical method seeks to uncover the rational grounds of experience, while the genetic method aims to explain experience itself. The irreconcilability of these two methods arises from their fundamentally distinct objectives: the critical method moves from experience to its underlying conditions, while the genetic method remains confined within the empirical scope of experience.

In more specific terms, the genetic method offers causal explanations by identifying the appropriate causes for a given occurrence, whereas the critical method seeks to ground our assessments of experience by determining the rational principles implicit in our epistemic, moral, or aesthetic activities. For Windelband, the task of philosophy is to systematically identify the principles that underlie our scientific, ethical, and aesthetic judgments, which correspond to the values of truth, goodness, and beauty in their most general form⁶⁷. This distinction between explaining

⁶⁴ Brigitte Falkenburg, “On Method”, ed. cit., p. 19.

⁶⁵ Katherina Kinzel, “Wilhelm Windelband and the problem of relativism”, in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 25(1), 2016, p. 95.

⁶⁶ Frederick Beiser, “Historicism and Neo-Kantianism”, in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 39 (4), 2008, p. 561.

⁶⁷ W. Windelband, *Präludien*, ed. cit., p. 30.

reality and critically elucidating values is central to Windelband's methodological approach. Both forms of reasoning involve a return to foundational concepts: the genetic method seeks to identify the causes of phenomena according to natural laws, while the critical method focuses on rational conditions – those conditions that possess general and necessary validity.

The critical method aims to rationalize the empirically given. In line with Neo-Kantian principles, Windelband posits that rational principles, as conditions of experience, cannot be understood in isolation from what they condition. To address this, he introduces the concept of a mediating factor within the critical method – a reflective process on the conditioned, through which the conditions themselves are discerned. Windelband consistently argued that philosophy necessitates the support of a complementary discipline, one that provides the material for critical reflection.

The issue raised by Windelband's notion of critique appears relatively straightforward to articulate. Critical philosophy, in its quest to uncover the rational principles that underpin cultural life, begins with this very life as its foundation. The initial step involves analyzing various cultural spheres to identify their fundamental principles. However, without a method to ensure that this starting point is not merely contingent, how can we assert the existence of rational principles? These principles should be specific to the object under analysis, yet the philosophical aim of the critique of reason is for these principles to assert universal validity.

Windelband argues that both scientific inquiry and cultural expressions are grounded in certain rational principles. These principles, however, cannot be validated solely through logical argumentation, as they require engagement with the content of experience, yet they also resist direct empirical verification. Windelband thus contends that these rational principles possess a form of necessity that is not logical but teleological⁶⁸. This implies that their validity must be recognized unconditionally for specific goals to be achieved. This teleological necessity highlights the essential role of rational principles as foundational to the pursuit of knowledge and the broader aims of cultural and intellectual endeavors.

Windelband's interpretation of rational principles as norms is fundamentally tied to their relationship with the goals pursued by rational agents⁶⁹. This distinction marks the crucial divergence between the genetic and critical approaches to philosophy. Regardless of whether these rational principles are fully acknowledged, they function as norms that must be accepted as valid under the premise that thought seeks truth, goodness, and beauty—thereby achieving these ends in a universally recognizable way. These norms possess a conditional structure: if we are to engage in theoretical, practical, or aesthetic judgments, we must recognize a set of norms as the intrinsic presuppositions that underpin the

⁶⁸ W. Windelband, "Critical or Genetic Method?", in Sebastian Luft (ed.), *The Neo-Kantian Reader*, ed. cit., p. 275.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

rationality of our practices. This perspective underscores the necessity of these norms not as contingent facts, but as foundational elements essential to the coherent functioning of rational inquiry and judgment.

The primary challenge of this position lies in its tendency, particularly in its initial formulation, to adopt an excessively formalistic approach. The concept of teleological necessity implies that we must presuppose a form of norm with unconditional validity as the foundation for the rationality of our theoretical, practical, or aesthetic judgments. However, the mechanism by which this presupposition is mediated by a substantive principle remains unclear. This explanatory gap raises concerns about the practical applicability of such norms, as the connection between the formal necessity of these norms and their concrete instantiation in rational practices is insufficiently articulated. To further explore this difficulty, it is necessary to specifically address the problem of history.

Windelband himself establishes a connection between philosophy and history that transcends the narrow confines of the theory of history, thereby directly engaging with the issue of method. In his essay on the *Principles of Logic*, Windelband asserts:

For in the sense of the critical method ... philosophical thinking is everywhere directed to examine the human activities of reason, from which, in the course of history, the total structures of cultural life arise, in order to investigate to what extent, the general contents of reason, independent of the specific conditions of mankind and purely factually founded in themselves, come to consciousness and validity.⁷⁰

This passage links the critical method to the concept of the course of history. As previously noted, the recognition of rational principles is inherently teleological. This teleological framework is more closely aligned with the narrative structures typical of historical accounts. However, this alignment should not be mistaken for an endorsement of a metaphysical explanation of history. Instead, it suggests that rationality is not a predetermined or fully realized aspect of human life but rather an ideal that we continually pursue. This interpretation underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of rationality, presenting it as a guiding principle that unfolds progressively rather than as a fixed, immutable entity.

The characterization of history as the *organon* of philosophy rests on the premise that cultural values do not emerge from natural laws but rather through a progressive temporal development that is not governed by necessity. Windelband elaborates on this by asserting that our true understanding of cultural values is rooted in history, where these values have evolved through the gradual convergence of diverse peoples into a unified humanity, encompassing the spheres

⁷⁰ W. Windelband, "Die Prinzipien der Logik", in Arnold Ruge (ed.), *Encyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, Band 1: Logik, Tübingen, Mohr, 1912, p. 3.

of science, morality, law, art, and religion. He contends that humanity, as rational beings, is not defined by psychological attributes but is realized through historical development. Our participation in universal reason is made possible only in our capacity as historical beings – an evolving species. Thus, history, in Windelband's view, serves as the authentic organon of philosophy, as it is within the historical process that the absolute spirit finds its true expression.

In line with the idealist tradition, Windelband characterizes philosophy as the process of humankind's self-knowledge. However, this self-knowledge is conveyed through history, unfolding as a dual process of self-formation and self-understanding⁷¹. Windelband portrays this movement as a laborious departure from our natural condition. While the starting point is an indeterminate and unfinished state, the evolution of humankind signifies the completion and enrichment of consciousness. The depiction of humanity through history is therefore more intricate and comprehensive, offering a more suitable foundation for philosophical reflection. Yet, rationality is not confined to philosophical discourse; it manifests in the sciences, religion, arts, and politics. Thus, the self-knowledge of humankind is not achieved merely by analyzing our capacity to think and its historical development but through the reconstruction of the evolution of principles and ideas that shape the formation of our culture. These elements serve as the critical philosopher's materials.

In his final work, Windelband critically examines the relationship between history and rational consciousness. While history demonstrates the progressive realization of rationality, Windelband contends that the gap between the real and the ideal remains fundamentally unbridgeable. He attributes this persistent divide to the nature of value itself, asserting that "the fact of valuing necessarily involves the duality of value-affirmation and value-opposition in reality"⁷². Windelband argues that if our understanding of reality were complete and ultimate truth were attained, the evaluative dimension of knowledge would be lost. For him, this intrinsic duality between thought and reality represents a final, insurmountable challenge. Windelband further posits that if value and reality were to fully coincide, all volition and activity would come to a halt, as everything would exist in a state of eternal completion. He argues that the essence of temporality lies in the ongoing disparity between what is and what ought to be. This distinction, mirrored in the human will, constitutes the fundamental condition of human existence. Consequently, our knowledge is inherently limited by this divide and cannot transcend it to fully grasp its origins⁷³.

⁷¹ W. Windelband, "Die Geschichte der Philosophie," in Wilhelm Windelband (ed.), *Die Philosophie im Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. Festschrift für Kuno Fischer*. Band II., Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1905, p. 186.

⁷² W. Windelband, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1914, p. 434.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

In his final reflections on the relationship between reality and the ideal, Windelband explores the inherent challenges within the historical content of philosophy. For Windelband, this relationship manifests as an antinomy, leading him to characterize his philosophical doctrine as an *antinomanismus*. This term encapsulates the persistent difficulty in reconciling reality with thought, highlighting the tension between what “is” and what “ought”. Although history reveals the progressive realization of rational consciousness, the unbridgeable gap between the real and the ideal remains a central issue. According to Windelband, reality always remains, in a certain sense, refractory to the demands of thought. He identifies this gap as intrinsic to the concept of value, emphasizing that this duality presents a final, unsolvable problem in the pursuit of knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS

The earlier discussion of Cohen and Windelband’s elaboration of the philosophical method allows us to reach several conclusions regarding the philosophical program of the forerunners of Neo-Kantianism.

The first conclusion addresses the relationship between synthetic and analytic procedures. The Neo-Kantians reversed the traditional relationship between synthesis and analysis as originally developed by Kant. Their regressive method supports a transcendental argument that avoids the pitfalls associated with the faculty concept of the mind. However, this approach left unresolved the challenge of unifying the distinct domains of knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics. Unlike Kant, who based this distinction on a certain psychological doctrine, the Neo-Kantians could not rely on such a foundation. The concept of culture was likely introduced as a solution to this problem, signaling a philosophical shift from transcendental idealism to a philosophy of culture.

The second conclusion is related to the relationship between the method and idealism. Windelband expanded the scope of logic by incorporating the historical sciences and historical consciousness, a stance rooted in his conception of the normativity of reason and his view of history as the medium through which ideal values are realized. Cohen, by contrast, sought to broaden the logical problem through the integration of infinitesimal calculus. This was not merely to address a potential gap in the theory of science, but because this discussion enabled him to justify a particular conception of idealism in which the opposition between thought and a reality resistant to conceptualization was effectively neutralized. The strong connection between transcendental philosophy and the history of the sciences thus became a hallmark of Marburg Neo-Kantianism, likely contributing to the lasting influence of Cohen’s work, despite its controversial aspects.

This issue can be articulated through Cohen's principle of continuity in contrast to Windelband's being-value dichotomy, or alternatively, as a conceptual pairing of continuity and validity. Cohen's emphasis on the continuity between thinking and being stands in stark contrast to Windelband's focus on discontinuity, highlighting a fundamental metaphysical divergence in their respective interpretations of idealism.

Finally, we can assert that, beyond their divergences, the interpretation of method as a regressive procedure, in both cases, takes on a progressive dimension associated with the historicity or dynamism of reason. The fact of science is never static but is always characterized by a temporal density. The historicity of a fact implies a dynamism of reason, rather than contingency, relativity, or arbitrariness. Neo-Kantian philosophers understood philosophy as a critical and reflexive task, aimed at uncovering the conditions underlying a given product of intellectual life. As an expression of rational creative capacities, this product serves as the starting point for exploring the rational principles behind its production. As Cohen himself states: "The idealism with which we characterize the logic of pure knowledge is understood by us in a historical sense. Accordingly, we have consistently endeavored to pursue the connection between systematic development and historical orientation. Classical idealism, indeed, demands this intimate connection."⁷⁴

Although unorthodox with respect to Kant's original proposal, Cohen and Windelband each follow, in their own way, the only path that remained open: the critical one. The emphasis on the regressive method is far from neutral; rather, it is rooted in substantive assumptions held by both philosophers. It is precisely for this reason that the two Neo-Kantian schools – Cohen's and Windelband's – hold irreconcilable positions regarding the nature of thought.

⁷⁴ Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, ed. cit., p. 595.

