

# NEW APPROACHES TO NEO-KANTIANISM

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# Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
Introduction: towards a reconsideration of Neo-Kantianism <i>Nicolas de Warren and Andrea Staiti</i>	I
PART I NEO-KANTIANISM AND PHILOSOPHY	17
1. The Neo-Kantians on the meaning and status of philosophy <i>Andrea Staiti</i>	19
2. Neo-Kantian ideas of history <i>Alan Kim</i>	39
3. Neo-Kantianism and analytic philosophy <i>Hans-Johann Glock</i>	59
4. <i>Reise um die Welt</i> : Cassirer's cosmological phenomenology <i>Nicolas de Warren</i>	82
PART II ETHICS AND CULTURE	109
5. Philosophy as philosophy of culture? <i>Christian Krijnen</i>	III
6. The validity of norms in Neo-Kantian ethics <i>Beatrice Centi</i>	127
7. Neo-Kantianism in the philosophy of law: its value and actuality <i>Jonathan Trejo-Mathys</i>	147

8.	Neo-Kantianism and the social sciences: from Rickert to Weber <i>Gerhard Wagner and Claudius Härpfer</i>	171
9.	Simmel's <i>Rembrandt</i> and <i>The View of Life</i> <i>Karen Lang</i>	186
10.	The binding of Isaac and the boundaries of reason: religion since Kant <i>Peter E. Gordon</i>	203
PART III THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE		219
11.	The philosophy of the Marburg School: from the critique of scientific cognition to the philosophy of culture <i>Sebastian Luft</i>	221
12.	Natorp's psychology <i>Daniel O. Dahlstrom</i>	240
13.	Cassirer and the philosophy of science <i>Massimo Ferrari</i>	261
14.	Kant and the Neo-Kantians on mathematics <i>Luca Oliva</i>	285
	<i>Primary sources</i>	307
	<i>Index</i>	318

## CHAPTER I

# *The Neo-Kantians on the meaning and status of philosophy*

*Andrea Staiti*

### Introduction

There seems to be a recurring pattern in the history of modern philosophy: an evolution through a series of turns separated by more or less extended (and more or less turbulent) phases of “normality.” Each turn comes onto the scene with a claim to revolutionize the whole discipline and finally to set it on “the secure path of a science” (Kant 1998: 107 [B x]). While shifts of focus and reappraisals of priorities are as old as the discipline itself, *turns*, carried out with the aim of redefining from scratch philosophy’s tasks and methods, arguably start with Kant.<sup>1</sup> His Copernican turn can be considered paradigmatic for all subsequent turns in the history of philosophy. With it, Kant created a new language, articulated new problems, and specified the kinds of questions that philosophers for the next few generations felt legitimately entitled to ask. He prepared the terrain for both commentators such as Reinhold and Beck, whose work is primarily in the elucidation and systematizing exposition of Kant’s thought, and original figures such as the idealistic triad Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, as well as the philosophical–psychological school of Herbart and Fries. A few decades later in the nineteenth century, a new such turn redefined the discipline in accordance with the spirit of French positivism. The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed Husserl’s turn to phenomenology (which, incidentally, can only be understood in the aftermath of both the Kantian and the positivistic turns), and the second half of the twentieth century gave way to what Rorty famously christened “the linguistic turn.”

<sup>1</sup> One could argue that, almost two centuries before Kant, Descartes already advocated for some kind of turn in philosophy. However, I consider it helpful to identify two components as definitive of a “turn” in philosophy. A turn must involve both methods *and* tasks. While Descartes did indeed set up a new method for philosophical thinking, his project revolves around a set of tasks that he inherited from traditional Scholasticism, such as the proofs of God’s existence and the immortality of the soul. Therefore, only half of the historical pattern I am trying to describe here is predicated in Descartes.

Philosophical turns, of course, do not occur in a linear and irreversible way. They variously overlap and commingle, so that not infrequently philosophers working under the aegis of one turn may have hard times recognizing as philosophical the work of colleagues who haven't yet turned or are simply unwilling to do so. Inter- and intradepartmental grudges between self-branded analytic and self-branded continental philosophers in our time are a good example of this complex and non-linear development of the discipline through overlapping turns.

Whether the list of philosophical turns just outlined is exhaustive is a question I can leave aside here. If the ones I mentioned are at least *some* of the turns characterizing the past two centuries, however, they will suffice to exemplify the characteristic trend that I would like the reader to observe at the beginning of this chapter. Unlike in, say, the natural sciences, the phase of philosophical normal science established in the wake of a turn does not start to wane because of some groundbreaking discovery, or the like. There is arguably no equivalent to such discoveries in philosophy. Rather, it seems that most philosophical turns eventually lose momentum when practitioners in the field start to register a certain uneasiness about the excessive technicalization and the restriction of focus that every such turn inevitably implies. The initial enthusiasm ensuing from the ability to set boundaries to philosophical questioning and give precise definitions to philosophical terms tends eventually to morph into boredom and a sense of insipidity. This uneasiness generally coincides with a desire to recover a more holistic perspective in philosophy and to address the perennial questions about our human condition and its meaning in a world rendered by the advancement of empirical research increasingly foreign to our innermost aspirations.

Symptoms of "post-turn uneasiness" abound today. The aforementioned linguistic turn lost momentum even among thinkers who were trained in accordance with its most rigorous principles. In some cases accomplished philosophers working in the analytic tradition, such as Philip Kitcher and David McNaughton, voice disappointment with the most recent developments of the discipline, developments characterized by a stifling specialization and an incapacity to address the truly significant questions that philosophers traditionally ask. In a recent paper tellingly entitled "Why Is So Much Philosophy So Tedious?" McNaughton writes:

If philosophy is no more than a pyrotechnic display of ingenious argumentation, then Callicles was surely right when he chided Socrates and told him that philosophy was a fine activity for a youth, but a disgraceful one for

someone of mature years. A life devoted to solving crossword puzzles has little to commend it – and certainly does not deserve public subsidy. We should reject this conception of our discipline. Philosophy can and should deal with important issues. It should enable us both to understand our place in the world and to live in it.<sup>2</sup>

Philip Kitcher echoes the same feeling with slightly different words in his paper “Philosophy inside out,” where, after criticizing the current state of philosophy in its specialized and technicized form, he points out: “Philosophy grows out of an impulse toward understanding nature and the human place in it.”<sup>3</sup>

Note that both Kitcher and McNaughton counterpose narrow specialization to philosophy’s original commitment to shed light on the world as a whole and our place in it. Neither of them, however, explains just what they mean by “the world as a whole” and “our place in it,” probably taking the meaning of these expressions to be somehow intuitive. And while there is, indeed, an intuitive meaning to these phrases, the sophisticated system of mereological (whole/parts) and spatial (place) metaphors undergirding their intelligibility is worthy of philosophical scrutiny. The largely forgotten work of the Neo-Kantians offers precious resources for this endeavor.

This chapter examines some attempts in Neo-Kantianism to clarify the meaning and status of philosophy. All such attempts revolve around the notion that philosophy inquires about the world as a whole, as opposed to the specialized sciences that focus exclusively on isolated parts of the world. The protagonists of this essay are Alois Riehl, Friedrich Eduard Beneke, and Heinrich Rickert. The positions of these thinkers diverge significantly in regard to (1) how we access the world as a whole; (2) how to grapple with the philosophical problems posed by the world as a whole; and (3) the relationship between philosophy and the empirical sciences, and, correlatively, between the world as a whole and the world’s parts. In spite of their differences, however, all these thinkers are conversant with Kant; thus, their disagreement is especially instructive concerning the far-reaching ramifications of the transcendental tradition at the dawn of the contemporary era, i.e. before the split between analytic and continental philosophy. My hope is that this retrieval of the Neo-Kantian work on the nature and status of philosophy is both illuminating and invigorating for those seeking to rethink

<sup>2</sup> D. McNaughton, “Why Is So Much Philosophy So Tedious?” *Florida Philosophical Review* 9/2 (2009), 1–13; here 5.

<sup>3</sup> P. Kitcher, “Philosophy inside out,” *Metaphilosophy* 42/3 (2011), 248–260; here 252.

the meaning of the discipline beyond the strictures of the so-called linguistic turn.

### The world-whole and the world's parts

In 1903 the Neo-Kantian philosopher Alois Riehl gave the following retrospective description of the foregoing century:

If somebody had resolved to speak about philosophy in public around the middle of the past century, he would have certainly suffered a disastrous failure. He would have found no audience for his talk, not even among his most cultivated contemporaries. Moreover, he would have exposed himself to the suspicion of being willing to praise something like alchemy in the age of the natural sciences. (Riehl 1903: 1)

Riehl knew that atmosphere very well from his student years, and his own brand of critical philosophy was largely influenced by it. It was the heyday of positivism in Germany following the demise of Hegel's speculative idealism and the impressive record of revolutionary discoveries in the natural sciences. In the eyes of the general public, philosophy had failed as a discipline for two interconnected reasons: (1) the lack of a clearly delimited field of inquiry; (2) the lack of a clearly defined and empirical research-method. As for the first point, the grandiose systems of German idealism had a pretension to weave together in one meaningful metaphysical narrative each and every segment of reality to form an exhaustive *Wissenschaft*. Hegel's system, for example, encompasses logic, physics, geography, political science, psychology, and virtually every other discipline ever cropping up in the history of humankind. The natural sciences, thus goes the positivist rebuke, were able to achieve their tremendous results only to the extent that they divided up their labor into manageable and clearly demarcated areas of inquiry. Philosophy failed because it was unable to do so. Second, the kinds of methods employed by philosophical system-builders are not empirical. Consider Hegel's dialectics. It is worked out at a very abstract and formal level in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and then used throughout the book to arrange the most diverse kinds of materials conceivable. This method is not designed to interrogate facts so that they can confirm or falsify hypotheses. No matter how intriguing and profound a narrative about absolute spirit it may result in, this is clearly not an empirical narrative that later practitioners can verify or amend on the basis of better observations and hypotheses.

Faced with such formidable lines of criticism, German philosophers in the positivist age had only a few options available: either abandon the discipline outright and jump on the bandwagon of specialized empirical research, or rethink the meaning of philosophy from the ground up, so as to create a legitimate intellectual space for it beside the empirical sciences. For those favoring this second option, they first sought refuge in Kant's critical philosophy. Kant was the last major German philosopher before the breakthrough of speculative idealism. Philosophy had to resume the Kantian work that had been interrupted by the advent of system-building thinkers like Fichte and Hegel. This approach can be found as early as 1832 in the work of the philosopher, pedagogue, and psychologist Friedrich Eduard Beneke. In his essay *Kant und die philosophische Aufgabe unserer Zeit*, written to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of publication of Kant's First Critique, Beneke sets out to separate the wheat from the chaff in Kant's seminal book. Beneke finds that the true merit of Kant's critical philosophy lies in its *pars destruens*, that is, in its forceful emphasis on the *limits* of scientific knowledge and the consequent rejection of metaphysics as a science. However, on Beneke's account, the *pars construens* of Kant's philosophy, that is, its positive spelling out of synthetic *a priori* knowledge as the condition for the possibility of empirical knowledge, is deeply flawed and even responsible for the bad speculative habits of the next generation of philosophers. This is because this synthetic *a priori* knowledge on which all further knowledge allegedly depends cannot be legitimately considered knowledge by Kantian standards. Kant's philosophy is thus self-contradictory. In Beneke's own words:

According to Kant's principles, the simple powers or forms of the human mind are *in no way cognizable*. Neither immediately from experience (in fact, experience cannot dig into the simple, into the in-itself, because it is entirely limited to products or appearances), nor independently of experience (in fact, for whatever we construct independently of experience out of mere concepts we have no guarantee regarding its existence), nor, finally, through some mediation between both dimensions, which would only unite in itself their respective imperfections. We then see that, in this respect, the Kantian theory of knowledge is caught up in an insoluble self-contradiction . . . Kant kicked out merely conceptual speculation through the front door only to let it in again through the back door. Instead of objective poetizing (poetizing about God and the world), on which he rightly issued a judgment of condemnation, he promoted subjective poetizing. (Beneke 1832: 32–33)

Once the notion of synthetic *a priori* knowledge is rejected as subjective poetizing, and the genuine spirit of Kantianism is declared to be its original



proximity to the natural sciences and the awareness of their limits, Beneke's task is to redefine what the *pars construens* of a philosophy inspired by Kant should be. He undertakes this in his next major philosophical work: *Die Philosophie in ihrem Verhältnisse zur Erfahrung, zur Spekulation und zum Leben Dargestellt* (1833). Here we find articulated an idea that characterizes the whole Neo-Kantian movement for the rest of the century and carries over to early twentieth-century phenomenology: "Philosophy should be the highest science, the science of sciences . . . Philosophy has absolutely *no single* object; its object is *all or nothing*, it is the totality, the whole in its highest unity" (Beneke 1833: 2–3). Interestingly, Beneke's main argument for the necessity of a science of the whole (*Ganzheitswissenschaft*) is driven by primarily humanistic concerns. While he admits that the division of labor is a *sine qua non* for scientific progress, he warns that "from such division of labor flow a number of pernicious influences for the formation (*Bildung*) of human beings" (Beneke 1833: 3). People educated exclusively in a specialized science are bound to have an extremely narrow and fragmented conception of themselves and the world. Beneke continues: "Therefore, beside and above such sciences dealing with *specific* objects there has to be a *universal* science that surveys the whole from a higher standpoint and regulates the entire intellectual activity" (Beneke 1833: 4). Note that the kind of "work on the totality" Beneke envisions for philosophy is fundamentally different from the "work on the totality" envisioned and carried out by, say, Hegel. Philosophy for Beneke does not work on the totality as the sum total of each and every segment of reality. It does not set out to systematize and weave together in a metaphysical narrative all the (partial) truths pertaining to this or that specific discipline. Each discipline works independently and empirically on its allotted segment of reality. Philosophy surveys and evaluates the whole *as a whole*, that is, it sets out to determine the notion of objectivity *in general* (prior to its formulation as biological, physical, psychological, or mathematical objectivity) and it asks about the knowability of the world *in general* (prior to its specification as knowledge of living things, physical phenomena, mental states, numbers, etc.). Moreover, philosophy problematizes and assesses the partitions of reality carried out in the specialized sciences; it tests the legitimacy of the disciplinary boundaries drawn in empirical research, and it evaluates its methods. By way of surveying the world as a whole prior to its subdivision into separate research fields, philosophy is in a position to ask questions that empirical research is bound to ignore, and to uphold Kant's critical vigilance concerning the intrinsic tendency of specialized research to take a particular field of inquiry for the whole world.

At this point, readers familiar with Kant's First Critique may be tempted to raise an eyebrow. By introducing the notion of "the world as a whole" as the proper subject matter of philosophy isn't Beneke reverting precisely to what Kant dismissed as objective poetizing? Didn't Kant definitively establish that "the world as a whole" is not an object of possible experience? In the Antinomy of Pure Reason, Kant pointed out that the "concept of the world-whole" rests on the idea of an "absolute totality in the synthesis of appearances" (Kant 1998: 460 [A 408]) which, however, is never given in actual experience. We always experience this or that particular appearance, but we never have the total synthesis of all appearances given within one single experience, so that all theoretical judgments regarding the world-whole as the total synthesis of appearances are bound to remain unwarranted. How can a philosopher trained in the Kantian tradition then assign to philosophy the task of theorizing about the world as a whole?

Beneke, to whose determination of philosophy we shall return in a later section of this chapter, does not directly address this issue; however, if we look more closely at the kinds of theoretical tasks that Beneke assigns to a philosophy of the world-whole, we recognize that his notion of such a philosophy differs from Kant's. For Kant the questions asked by rational cosmology (the metaphysical discipline dealing with the world as a whole) set out to establish *factual* truths about the total synthesis of *factual* appearances. For example, rational cosmology asks whether the world has a beginning in time, whether it is made of simple elements, and whether it admits of causality out of freedom over and above natural causality. The answers to these questions admittedly exceed the power of the understanding by Kantian standards. However, there is no reason to reject the possibility of a different perspective on the world as a whole, one that does not attempt to determine theoretically the world-whole as a fact, but rather considers the world-whole in terms of what we could provisionally call its ontological constituents. From this perspective we would not ask, say, whether the world-whole has a beginning in time, but rather, for example, whether we can legitimately construe the totality of what is as merely physical or we have to admit of other dimensions of reality. In order to adjudicate on this question, we would not need to have a total synthesis of all factual appearances given in intuition. It would be enough to show that if we construe the world-whole as consisting exclusively of physical appearances we would leave out of consideration an entire domain of appearances that are *de facto* acknowledged and successfully investigated in some existing scientific discipline. To stay with this example, if we construe the world as consisting exclusively of physical appearances we

arbitrarily rule out the kinds of phenomena studied in psychology, mathematics, and the social sciences. We make a metaphysical move that obliterates important elements of our experience and significant results in scientific research. In this regard, to mention a popular example, Rutherford's dictum that "all science is either physics or stamp collecting" is not the pronouncement of a serious physicist working within the theoretical limits of his discipline but the arbitrary "objective poetizing" of a rather unsophisticated metaphysician. One specific disciplinary point of view is illegitimately extended to the totality of knowledge, and one delimited field of inquiry is taken to be the world-whole.

Although, as we saw, Beneke can be credited for establishing a new task for philosophy continuing the Kantian tradition and taking seriously the positivistic challenge, we have to fast-forward almost one full century to find an explicit reflection on the conditions and methods of philosophy as the theoretical investigation of the world-whole. It is especially Heinrich Rickert who supplements the practice of philosophy in the Neo-Kantian spirit with a sustained reflection on the notion of world-whole. In his last book *Grundprobleme der Philosophie* (1934), Rickert points out that "with respect to its content, the concept of world-whole must remain undetermined at first." This is because philosophy cannot rely on a simple conceptual determination to delimit its subject matter like the specialized sciences do. Every determination is a negation, as Spinoza taught; therefore, to determine the world-whole by a simple conceptual definition would mean to demarcate it from something that it is not, which would contradict precisely its status of "totality." Rickert suggests that this fundamental difficulty confronting philosophy in the very definition of its task is the cause of the disunity that historically characterizes the discipline. Philosophers tend to overlook the conceptual problems connected to the definition of a science of the whole. They resolve to focus on this or that particular sector of reality and treat it as if it were the key to revealing the essence of the whole. A philosophical definition and investigation of the world-whole *as such*, however, is unavoidable. The very fact that we are able to recognize the fields of inquiry of specialized disciplines as *parts* or segments of the world logically requires a definition of the whole of which they are parts. Parts and whole are logically interdependent concepts.

Rickert's way out of this impasse draws on what he terms the *heterological principle*, one of the tenets of his epistemology and the key to systematic thinking in general (as opposed to mere system-building conceptual speculation). First, we have to recognize that the world-whole

as it is given to us in sheer intuition (the Kantian *Anschauung*) is an unmanageable, “unsurveyable multiplicity” (Rickert 1934: 39) or, as he calls this in earlier writings, a “heterogeneous continuum” (Rickert 1962: 34). In the Heraclitean flux of our sensory experience, there are no set boundaries (everything is continuous with everything else) and no intrinsic similarities (everything is different from everything else). If we are to cognize the whole as such, we have to introduce order and distinction to it with the aid of conceptual thought. This already holds true for the cognition of individual objects and classes of objects studied in the specialized sciences. We have to single out a discrete historical event (say, the French Revolution) or a discrete natural phenomenon (say, linear motion) from the immeasurable multiplicity of reality in order to be able to produce knowledge in history and in natural science. This can only happen to the extent that we employ conceptual criteria of *selection* to organize the heterogeneous material given by the senses in terms of a historical individual event (individualizing concept formation) or a general concept encompassing a multiplicity of individuals (generalizing concept formation).<sup>4</sup>

In light of these remarks we can now pose the problem of cognition of the world-whole. It is clear that we cannot isolate the world-whole as if it were a large-scale individual event or a lawfully regulated phenomenon against the backdrop of some further material that we decide to exclude. To continue with the above example, while we can isolate the French Revolution against the backdrop of historical reality at large or linear motion against the backdrop of all further properties and qualities of moving things, no such operation is possible for the world-whole. No single concept (“French Revolution,” “linear motion”) can ever isolate and determine the world-whole. Rickert points out, however, that we can exploit the logical properties of *negation* and set out to determine the world-whole with the aid of a *pair* of mutually exclusive, complementary concepts. This procedure is what he terms heterology. In Rickert’s words:

We only need to ask ourselves whether the part of the world-whole determined through negation (the part which alone is accessible directly to cognition) could not perhaps be “completed” [*ergänzt*], in the literal sense of the word, through the concept of *another* part of the world. (Rickert 1934: 41)

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough discussion of individualizing and generalizing concept formation, respectively, in the historical and the natural sciences see *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science* (Rickert 1986).

If we determine a historical event as, say, the French Revolution we are implicitly negating the rest of history. We are implicitly saying that it is *not* any other such event. However, if we try to think about what is “not the French Revolution” we are at a loss to determine positively the content of our thought. The concept “French Revolution” does not identify a part of the whole whose negation results in an intelligible complementary part completing the whole at issue. However, this is not the case with every concept:

Wherever we can construct concepts that, through their determinations (i.e., their limitations), do not merely negate, but they simultaneously determine positively the negated component that is missing from the whole, we can think in terms of alternatives. In so doing we are able to grasp conceptually, through a kind of detour, a whole that cannot be grasped through concepts in a direct fashion. This is because we can construct two concepts, under which every element belonging to the whole necessarily falls. (Rickert 1934: 41)

Heterological pairs of concepts can be employed to determine conceptually subordinated wholes of reality, such as, say, “the physical world as a whole.” If we build the concept “living thing” and proceed to negate it we get as a result the positive concept “inert matter.” We can then see with evidence that every conceivable entity in the physical world falls under either one concept or the other. The two concepts taken together thus circumscribe and determine the physical world as a whole. The same heterological strategy can be employed to address “the world as a whole” as the proper object of philosophy:

What remains to do in philosophy, then, is to identify the pairs of concepts that represent world-alternatives (*Weltalternativen*) in the above sense, and thus make us sure that everything in the world falls either under one or the other of the two concepts . . . Put briefly, as soon as we know the alternatives that can be considered for the conceptual articulation of the world as a whole we thereby acquire an all-encompassing knowledge of the world. (Rickert 1934: 41–42)

Before we proceed to examine two heterological pairs of concepts that lend themselves to Rickert’s purpose, however, we have to face a challenge brought to Rickert from another group of *sui generis* Neo-Kantians. The challenge comes from Georg Simmel and Wilhelm Dilthey and it discredits the very project of philosophizing about the world as a whole in a theoretically oriented spirit and relying exclusively on the power of conceptual thought.

### *Weltanschauung* and science

In the foregoing section, I drew on Rickert's last published work *Grundprobleme der Philosophie* (1934) to articulate his understanding of philosophy as the theoretical discipline dealing with the world as a whole. However, Rickert had been reflecting on these problems and promoting this view from the very beginning of his philosophical career in the late nineteenth century. In earlier texts he characterizes the task of philosophy as the production of a "comprehensive theory of *Weltanschauung*" (Rickert 1986: 12). The introduction of this term in late nineteenth-century philosophy was both decisive and controversial. Rickert's choice of the term *Weltanschauung* to designate the task of philosophy is deeply rooted in a philosophical dispute that I shall attempt to reconstruct in a few brushstrokes before we can move on to examine the specifics of his philosophical proposal.

Etymologically, *Weltanschauung* means literally worldview; however, the English translation does not retain the philosophical ring of the term *Anschauung*. In Kant's philosophy *Anschauung*, or intuition, is opposed to discursive knowledge. *Anschauung* does not and cannot grant knowledge. It merely provides the material for conceptual subsumption. Taken literally, then, the term *Weltanschauung* alludes to a pre-discursive dimension of our experience, in which the world is somehow available to us intuitively but not cognized. This is the conception of worldview holding sway among the so-called life-philosophers, such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel. Both thinkers were predominantly interested in the dynamics of cultural life as studied by the human sciences and they were filled with the 'historical sense' characteristic of the nineteenth century as a whole. They advocated a reform of philosophy guided by a consideration of historical life, or what Dilthey came to designate as a critique of historical reason.

Dilthey is arguably the most vocal and influential proponent of philosophy as worldview. He points out that an unbiased "application of historical consciousness to philosophy and its history" inevitably brings to light a tension, or "antinomy," between the claims to universal truth of philosophical systems and their historical multiplicity (Dilthey 1960: 7). Such antinomy can only be "dissolved" (1960: 9) by way of tracing back philosophical systems to the historical life out of which they emerged. Their claims to timeless validity must be sacrificed, in order for their true meanings to become manifest. All appearances notwithstanding, the source of philosophical thinking is not purely theoretical. The conceptual constructions characterizing philosophical thinking tend to present

themselves as impersonal theoretical truths; however, on closer inspection they prove to be ultimately rooted in the personality and historical situation of the philosophers who produced them.

Georg Simmel presents a similar view in his essay *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (1910), which was so successful as to be reprinted six times in less than twenty years after its first appearance (Simmel 1996: 7–151). In one of the opening sections of the essay, Simmel defines the philosopher as the individual “who possesses the receptive and reactive organ for the totality of being,” that is, one who is “somehow touched by this totality and responds intellectually to it” (Simmel 1996: 16, 17). Such intellectual responses, however, flow from the inner center of the philosopher’s personality, not from her intellect alone. In this respect, the “native soil of philosophy” is “the stratum of *typical* personality within us,” understood as a middle layer between the factuality of an individual’s bare psychological existence and the timeless necessity of logical laws and unreal meaning-configurations (*Sinngebilde*) (Simmel 1996: 28). Simmel is fleshing out in more definite terms a version of Fichte’s old adage that the philosophical position one chooses depends on the *kind* of person one is. Accordingly, in a short essay *On the History of Philosophy* he suggests that each philosophy should be regarded as a worldview, as “an expression of the existential relationship between a mind and the cosmos as a whole” (Simmel 1980: 199).

This position bears significant consequences for the conception of truth in philosophy and the kind of cultural function that philosophy is taken to fulfill:

What matters in the assertions of philosophy is not the adequacy to an object – in whatever sense we understand it – but rather their adequate expression of the philosopher’s own being, of the human type that lives within the philosopher. (Simmel 1996: 29)

This, of course, is not a way to say that “anything goes” in philosophy. The expression of a certain personality can be more or less successful, more or less consistent, and more or less resonant with the broader historical reality in which it is articulated. However, the core point is that a scientifically oriented notion of truth does not do justice to the nature of philosophy. The driving force behind philosophical thinking is not the quest for scientifically secured results, as it befits the intellect, but the quest for meaning of the world as a whole, as it befits the human being as a whole.

These considerations stand in sharp contrast to the notion of *Weltanschauung* initially employed by Rickert and the Neo-Kantians of his school. As I pointed out above, in some of his earlier works Rickert



employed the term *Weltanschauung* to characterize the *terminus ad quem* of philosophical thinking, the final achievement of a successful philosophical inquiry. In the programmatic essay *Vom Begriff der Philosophie* (1910), for instance, he insists that philosophy “must produce a *Weltanschauung* to shed light on our position in the world as a whole” (Rickert 1999: 4). Note that for Rickert a worldview must be *produced* and not merely *expressed* by philosophy. Whatever our historical and personal point of departure may be, when we turn to philosophy we make an effort to think about ourselves and the world in a purely theoretical fashion, that is, we deliberately choose to adopt a perspective that transcends the particularity of our contingent standpoint. *Contra* Dilthey and Simmel, for Rickert a *philosophical* worldview ought to be a thoroughly theoretical construct.

Rickert rejects the premise that an intellectual perspective in philosophy, because of its one-sidedness, makes it intrinsically impossible to grasp the world as a whole:

As long as he does not let theory alone decide, that is, as long as he is guided by the interests stemming from life as a whole, man is interested exclusively in the world that we could characterize as his own world. The whole human being, precisely as “whole” or “existing” human being, will never transcend his “small” world and this small world inevitably takes on different shapes for different people. (Rickert 1999: 337–338)

The existential pathos and the pressing questions characteristic of life as a whole, for Rickert, have a restrictive function, rather than a function of disclosure. They bind us to significant particulars in the world, and they impede the broadening of perspective that leads one to reflect upon the world as a whole. In a way that resonates with the Greek notion of the contemplative life, Rickert is arguing that the intellect is the organ of freedom, that freedom which alone allows our thought to soar over the daily concerns and chores of our existence: “Therefore, only the *one-sided*, theoretically oriented man is able to reflect upon the world in its *totality*” (Rickert 1999: 337–338).

Rickert is not saying that we should leave out of philosophy those existential questions and intuitions that pertain to humans as wholes and often provide their very motivation to philosophize. He does want to say, however, that such existentially grounded questions and intuitions should be taken up as part of philosophy’s *subject-matter*, as opposed to tacitly or self-avowedly determining *the standpoint* from which one philosophizes. Theory does not stand in opposition to life, rather, it is the only stance from which life as a whole (and correlatively the world as a whole) becomes visible in the first place.



### The subject/object distinction versus the reality/value distinction

How are we to tackle the philosophical determination of the world as a whole? Early representatives of the Neo-Kantian movement turned to consciousness and its investigation. Beneke, for example, after determining philosophy as the “all-embracing, universal science,” insists that this definition does not rule out the possibility “that philosophy may have a particularly proximate object or a central point [*Mittelpunkt*] from which to survey the whole” (Beneke 1833: 10). This particularly proximate object is “our own self-consciousness” (Beneke 1833: 11) and “the fundamental task of all healthy philosophy is the analysis of human consciousness” (Beneke 1832: 49). Riehl subscribes to the same view when he states: “Philosophy is the theory of consciousness” (Riehl 1872: 27).

The definition of philosophy as the systematic study or analysis of human consciousness is certainly not new or distinctive of Neo-Kantianism. We can find earlier versions of this view in the work of the British empiricists, who are undoubtedly a major source of inspiration for figures such as Beneke and Riehl. However, the early Neo-Kantians’ appeal to consciousness as the doorway to philosophical understanding of the world as a whole poses a problem that did not trouble Locke or Hume: what is the relationship between philosophy and psychology as a specialized empirical science investigating a mere *part* of reality, namely, the human psyche? In Locke’s and Hume’s times psychology did not yet claim for itself the status of an independent, empirical discipline. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, and especially after the foundation of Wundt’s laboratory for experimental psychology in Leipzig (1879), philosophy could no longer articulate itself as a *Bewusstseinslehre* without somehow clarifying its relationship with empirical psychology. Isn’t it redundant to have two separate disciplines dealing with basically the same subject-matter?

Riehl attempts to shed light on this matter in a way that sounds more like a temporary compromise than a solution:

The difference between the philosophical disciplines in a narrow sense and psychology consists in this: the philosophical disciplines tackle the content or the objects of consciousness independently of their origin and independently of their characteristic of being thought. Psychology, on the contrary, pursues precisely the question about those processes out of which the content of consciousness crops up. The philosophical disciplines deal with psychic products, whereas psychology is the science of psychic processes. Obviously, if we possessed a satisfactorily worked out psychology, its position in the system of the philosophical sciences would equal the position of physics in the

system of the natural sciences. Such psychology would be at the same time the foundation and a part of the philosophical sciences. (Riehl 1872: 31)

A few lines below, Riehl even suggests that the difference between philosophy and psychology might be substantive only for us, that is from our limited perspective, and not pertain to the subject matter itself. After all, the distinction between the processes and the products of consciousness does not seem to have a *fundamentum in re*, but rather in our organization of the universe of knowledge.

The main problem with Beneke's and Riehl's perspective is that it is unclear whether it is really compatible with the notion of philosophy as the universal science of the world as a whole. First, while it is hardly deniable that whatever we take to exist must in some way or other relate back to consciousness, it is not obvious that consciousness grants a *privileged* access to the world as a whole and is therefore the mandatory object of philosophy. Couldn't we find our way to raise questions about the world as a whole from within the investigation of other dimensions of reality, say, history or physics? Second, even if we accept the primacy of consciousness and the centrality of psychology, do we have sufficient reasons to believe that the picture of the world-whole offered by this framework is accurate?

Similar questions led Rickert to revise significantly the early Neo-Kantians' understanding of philosophy and to redefine the status of the world-whole from a new perspective. In his aforementioned manifesto, *Vom Begriff der Philosophie*, he sets out to examine the tenability of the worldview that a philosophy like Beneke's and Riehl's necessarily underwrites. It is a worldview revolving around the subject/object dichotomy and counterposing consciousness to the rest of reality. To use the language of heterology, we could say that such a perspective seeks to grasp the world as a whole with the aid of the conceptual pair "subject" and "object." Accordingly, it considers the two dimensions of psychic and physical being as exhaustive and complementary. This picture of the world-whole, however, focuses exclusively on *reality* (*Wirklichkeit*) and it leaves completely out of consideration another domain, that of *value* (*Wert*), which alone provides the resources to account for the *intelligibility* of things and yields the insights fundamental to the articulation of the meaning of "the world and our place in it." Rickert explains:

Besides realities there are values, whose validity we want to understand. Only these two realms taken together constitute that which deserves the name "world." Thereby it is important to notice that values, which

we thus counterpose to realities, are not to be regarded as being themselves realities. (Rickert 1999: 13)

The notion of value constitutes the hinge of Rickert's philosophy and it deserves closer scrutiny. In order to approach it we must first direct our attention to a "third kind of beings" (Rickert 1934: 78) that are integral to our experience as much as psychic and physical realities. Let us think, for instance, of the meanings of words. While having a conversation, we do not only perceive the physical body of our interlocutor and the psychic reality attached to it. We also "receive" in the same, direct, immediate way the meanings of the words that he or she is uttering. These meanings are not psychic realities. They do not coincide with the thoughts of the speaker or with the acoustic stimuli of the listener. The very same meanings could be conveyed by a completely different sensible support, such as written words on paper. We can even recognize the same meaning as being instantiated by different words in different languages, such as the identical meaning of "red," "rot," "rosso," and "rouge."

Word-meanings for Rickert belong in a sphere of "being" distinct from that of psychic and physical occurrences, both of which fall under the broad category of reality. He labels this sphere of "being" that of *verstehbare Sinngebilde*, that is, understandable or intelligible meaning-configurations. The reference is explicitly to Plato's distinction between "*aisthetón*" and "*noetón*" (Rickert 1934: 81); however, for Rickert, intelligible being does not exist in a metaphysical otherworld. It is a fundamental ingredient of precisely the concrete earthly world that we experience, in which besides physical and psychic entities we undeniably encounter entities like word-meanings.

Rickert hastens to emphasize that word-meanings are only a tiny fraction of the intelligible meaning-configurations that we encounter in experience. "Besides them, there are also many other meaning-configurations that we likewise do not perceive but we understand" (Rickert 1934: 81). We can think here of the aesthetic meaning of a symphony, the moral or political meaning that shines through a certain gesture, or simply the meaning-configuration displayed by the arrangement of the furniture in our living room. In all these cases, for Rickert, we must acknowledge that in the concrete content of our experience there is more than meets the senses. Physical or psychic realities are the "carriers" of intelligible meaning-configurations (Rickert 1934: 80).

The fact that meaning-configurations are *intelligible* does not mean that they are automatically or necessarily understood. If we stay with the

simplest example of word-meanings, we can see that while single words have meaning *per se* (i.e. they can be understood), not all possible combinations of word-meanings result, in turn, in intelligible meaning-configurations. Moreover, even when a combination of word-meanings is intelligible, like in a grammatically well-formed sentence, this does not mean that what the sentence expresses is *valid*. Consider the difference between these three sentences: (1) “two plus foremost likes or”; (2) “two plus two equals five”; (3) “two plus two equals four.” The cluster of singly intelligible meaning-configurations in (1) does not amount to one overarching intelligible meaning-configuration. Contrariwise, both the meaning-configurations in (2) and in (3) add up to one intelligible overall meaning-configuration. We can understand both (2) and (3). Nonetheless, there is an undeniable difference between (2) and (3). The meaning-configuration in (3) is not only intelligible, it is also valid, and more specifically it falls into the distinctive sphere of validity of theoretical truth.

Values for Rickert are the non-empirical “entities” to which validity attaches and by reference to which we can orient ourselves in the *mundum intelligibilis* of non-sensible meaning-configurations. Values cannot be further explained by reference to other phenomena of meaning or reality. They are fundamental ingredients of our experience as much as the meaning-configurations, whose validity they determine. The “validity” of values is what we have to somehow presuppose if we are to make sense of our capacity to discriminate between valid and invalid clusters of meaning-configurations. Rickert is adamant that values can only be experienced on the basis of things that we hold as valuable (goods) and within concrete acts of valuation. Goods and acts of valuation are the “venue” where the domains of reality and value intersect, in the medium of some intelligible cluster of meaning-configurations or other. However, considered *per se*, values are part of the “third realm” of unreal meaning-configurations, of which they constitute the underlying principles.

What Rickert has in mind with the notion of *Geltung*, or validity, as the definitive characteristic of values and just what it means to recognize a value as valid is by no means self-evident. Anglophone readers can best approach the meaning of *Geltung* in German by reflecting on the experience associated with the word “compelling.” An argument can be compelling; a painting can be compelling; a great singer’s voice can be compelling; a moral purpose can be deemed compelling; etc. Of course the way in which an argument is compelling is different from the way in which someone’s voice is compelling. But there is something common to those experiences, as marked by the use of the same word. In all these cases,

Rickert would say, we are exposed to values. There is something that we experience as transcending our own mental acts, revealing itself through the object at issue (argument, painting, song, etc.) and exerting a compelling force on us. Needless to say, we can decide to stray away. We can refuse to acknowledge and conform to these compelling forces. We can more or less deliberately think illogically, despise aesthetic beauty, or reject moral intuitions. In Rickert's narrative, however, in so doing we are straying from the compelling force that a given value is exerting on our mental acts through an experienced state-of-affairs.

The possibility of experiencing "compelling-ness" in very different spheres of experience, ranging from aesthetic beauty to logical stringency, should allow us to broaden the ordinary meaning of the terms "valid/invalid" and to avoid thinking of validity as an exclusively theoretical or logical phenomenon. The validity of a moral value can shine through a certain kind of behavior, and the validity of an aesthetic value can pervade a musical melody. At an even more elementary level, the play of our visual experiences happens in a "medium of validity" that we call reality. This is why they manifest to us objects that we are compelled to call "existent."

For Rickert, then, the fundamental heterological pair for investigating the world as a whole is "reality/value." Whatever is, is either real (physical or psychic) or valid (a meaning-configuration displaying some relation to a value and carried by a real existent, be it physical or psychic). This, of course, does not end the task of philosophy. Once this fundamental heterology is established, a broad set of tasks opens up for philosophy. First, the acknowledgment of values as a fundamental ingredient of reality introduces a new standpoint from which to address the traditional controversies between mechanism and vitalism in the philosophy of nature, and between associationists and gestaltists in the philosophy of psychology. Both living organisms and complex mental states (*Gestalten*) can be considered as *wholes* irreducible to the sum total of their parts because their unity is grounded in a value-related configuration of meaning. Second, a lot of further work would be required to articulate a "system of all values," which Rickert deems "the only means toward systematic knowledge of the universe of meaning-configurations" (Rickert 1934: 91).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For a presentation of Rickert's system of values and a comprehensive discussion of his philosophy see my entry "Heinrich Rickert," in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/heinrich-rickert/>.

### Conclusion

Is there anything we can learn from the Neo-Kantians regarding the current predicament of philosophy? Can we at least understand better the nature of the uneasiness expressed by philosophers like Kitcher and McNaughton?

First, the reason why the linguistic turn feels so unbearably narrow is because it arbitrarily excludes from philosophical consideration a large number of perfectly intelligible meaning-configurations. It restricts investigation to the sphere of linguistic meaning-configurations and treats all other meaning-configurations as “metaphysical” and therefore unintelligible. To be sure, this allowed philosophy to make significant progress in the understanding of language, but it distorted the way we look at other spheres of meaning, such as aesthetic, ethical, and political meaning. There is no reason to impose on philosophy such limitation or to stipulate that we first have to transpose intelligible meaning-configurations into linguistic meaning-configurations in order to address them. For instance, we do not need to reduce the experience of ethical meaning-configurations to the language in which we express ethical claims. We can study *both* the language of ethical claims *and* the ethical meaning-configurations that we directly encounter in experience. Moreover, the fact that we use language to articulate ethical claims entirely presupposes the givenness of intelligible meaning-configurations revolving around ethical values. If we ignore these latter, the study of the former is bound to become uninteresting.

Second, upon what conditions can philosophy “enable us both to understand our place in the world and to live in it”?<sup>6</sup> I believe that Rickert’s “ontological pluralism” is the *sine qua non* for this purpose (Rickert 1934: 54–55). As long as philosophy produces only endless variations of physicalist reductionism, the chances that it will be able to enlighten us regarding our place in the world and how to live in it are scant at best. This is simply because the world in which *we* live includes precisely *us*, that is, psychic subjects experiencing meanings and values as well as physical things. There is no need to be a Cartesian dualist to admit of psychic reality in the world, and there is no need to be a metaphysical Platonist to admit of objective meanings and values in our experience. But to reduce “the world as a whole” to a play of sub-particles, consciousness to an epiphenomenon of complex

<sup>6</sup> McNaughton, “Why Is So Much Philosophy So Tedious?,” 5.

aggregates of sub-particles, and meanings and values to evolutionary tricks of nature, means to alienate philosophy precisely from *our* world, which pays little attention to reductionism and continues to be an ontologically pluralistic world, populated by psychic, physical, and meaningful entities.