

Entrevista sobre o neokantismo

Agosto 2011.

Denis Seron (Universidade de Liège). Tradução Ana Thereza Dürmaier.

English version.

1. How do you understand the relation of Neo-kantianism with the origins of contemporary philosophy? Has Neo-kantianism any kind of continuity with the philosophy of the 20th. Century or not?

There are significant similarities between neo-Kantianism and analytic philosophy, although it is often unclear whether there is any historical reality behind them.

The first point to be made concerns conceptualism. It is well known that the classical analytic tradition is broadly “conceptualist.” This latter term is usually meant to refer to a wide variety of views including Frege’s and Russell’s theory of descriptions, Quine’s reparsing of proper names, McDowell’s minimal empiricism, Searle’s Fregean descriptivism, etc. To put it somewhat simplistically, the conceptualist view is that, at least in most cases, referring to objects in the world essentially requires using concepts, the crucial point being that this is claimed to be true not only of typical propositional attitudes such as beliefs, but also of all, or at least most of, perceptual experiences. Now, conceptualism thus understood is also a distinctive feature of neo-Kantian anti-empiricism. (Although some empiricists, for example Brentano’s pupil Carl Stumpf, have also defended conceptualist views, conceptualism generally tends to conflict with empiricism, for the obvious reason that the more is ascribed to “knowledge by description,” the less to experience, and conversely.) The major source of neo-Kantian conceptualism is, of course, Kant’s view that the representation of an object, as opposed to mere sensation, must necessarily be *thought* and thus conceptually determined. But on the other hand, Dewalque has recently pointed out that strong conceptualism is actually neo-Kantian rather than Kantian. By rejecting Kant’s transcendental aesthetics, neo-

Kantians not only strengthened the role of conceptual thought in knowledge, but also went as far as to frame a (Leibniz-style rather than strictly Kantian) generalized conceptualism according to which nothing more is required for knowledge than conceptual thought. Note that there possibly are historical links — Natorp’s influence on Carnap, for example — between both sorts of conceptualism, but this question is still waiting to be explored. At any rate, this clearly suggests that neo-Kantian conceptualism might well represent, to some extent, a philosophical position which is still well alive today.

A further important thing about the relevance of neo-Kantianism today is that both neo-Kantian and analytic philosophers are notoriously inclined towards some form of ontological naturalism or physicalism. Neo-Kantian naturalism, at least in its ontological version (“object” is equivalent to “physical object”), is clearly inherited from Kant. One of the major theses of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that being an object involves being subject not only to the categories of the understanding, but also to the conditions of space and time. Thus, Kant substitutes for the Cartesian *res inextensa* a transcendental ego which is, consequently, transcendent to all objects, unobjectifiable, etc. For this reason, the neo-Kantians’ naturalist approach to objective reality is consistent with an anti-naturalist approach to the pure ego: the pure ego cannot be an object — it requires to be “transcendentally” elucidated.

Of course, this Kantian framework has not much in common with naturalism as understood by contemporary philosophers of mind, which admittedly stems from the Vienna Circle and behaviorism. Nonetheless, I think the question whether it makes sense to talk of an implicit Kantian background at this level should be left open. It is interesting to note that naturalism led Natorp to promote a view of phenomenal consciousness that is surprisingly close to that of many contemporary philosophers of mind. For Natorp, consciousness as such functions as a blind spot for any theorization. More precisely, consciousness has three parts or moments — the pure ego, the phenomenal content and the relation between the two — all of which are, as such, not properly knowable. However, this does not preclude Natorp from saying that knowledge or theorization in general must somehow be grounded in phenomenal experience, namely in that moment of consciousness which he calls the phenomenal content. His idea is that theorization requires constructive and reconstructive procedures that must both derive from phenomenal consciousness and turn one away from it. This (profoundly Kantian) doctrine strikingly resembles the current representational theories of consciousness, according to which consciousness is accessible only in the objects of intentional states.

2. For you, what is the reason for the renewal of Neo-kantian studies in the last decade?

Neo-Kantian studies have enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years. The reason for this is not clear, for it is difficult to distinguish motivations due to the historical evolution of philosophy from each researcher's individual concerns. For example, many researchers interested in Husserl or Heidegger have been led to investigate the influence of neo-Kantians such as Natorp, Rickert, and Lask on these two authors (Krijnen, Courtine, Dewalque, Zahavi, Egger, Seron, etc.). This new line of investigation certainly represents one of the most promising research fields in the current literature on neo-Kantianism. It is plausible to say that the recent renewal of neo-Kantian studies is also explained by the current situation of philosophy. First of all, the decline of Heidegger-style "continental" philosophy has prompted some philosophers to search for new paradigms different from those endorsed in analytic philosophy, which they deemed unsatisfactory. Secondly, the Kantian paradigm may have appeared to be a remedy for the immoderate realism or naturalism usual in contemporary metaphysics and philosophy of mind.

This latter point is certainly one of the most interesting ones concerning the continuing relevance of neo-Kantian philosophy to present-day philosophy. The "critical" point of view adopted by neo-Kantians, basically, is that metaphysics must be preceded and guided by the theory of knowledge. This is the core idea of what Kant calls the critique of pure reason. "The critique, he said, is the necessary preparation for the advancement of a founded metaphysics" (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, BXXXVI). The general thought is that the philosopher should not presuppose objectivity as being, so to speak, simply present at hand just as it is, but rather view it as the *result* of constitutive procedures which require to be clarified at a more basic level. The *fieri*, Natorp says, must precede the *ens*. In a sense, the whole neo-Kantian endeavor can be seen as an attempt to realize this idea without falling into psychologism.

In my opinion, this constructivist-style perspective does not necessarily involve idealism. It simply means that realism should not be a starting point. Realism needs to be grounded by means of a careful analysis or "critique" of the way objects are constituted. Robert Brisart has thus recently offered considerations designed to show that by such a "no ready-made theory," Natorp — like Quine in quite a different way — provides a convincing alternative to contemporary metaphysical realism.

The situation is quite different with respect to the philosophy of mind. Methodological concerns, while often lacking in contemporary metaphysics, plays a central role here. However, I think naturalism gives rise to some problems that are not fundamentally different. The naturalistic attitude in the philosophy of mind generally amounts to assuming that

scientific objectivity is unproblematically identical with the objectivity of natural sciences. Since objectivity thus understood is supposed to constitute the “scientific image of the world,” it is also supposed to be essential to all scientific-minded philosophy. The consequence of this is that physical entities or entities now proved to be naturalizable — as is intentionality in the functionalist approach — are no longer considered to imply any *philosophical* problem. Now, the trouble with this robust naturalism is that it is based on a certain idea of science and nature that may appear to be a non-scientific dogma. It is not unnatural to suppose that the critical stance (in the largest and most neutral sense) is more essential to scientificity than is naturalism, or that the philosophical investigation of the mind must precede and motivate any metaphysical decision about naturalism in the philosophy of mind, rather than conversely. In other words, philosophers should ask not only how, but also why the mind needs to be naturalized. Of course, it is tautological to argue that the mind must be naturalized because naturalism is the only acceptable paradigm for the philosophy of mind.

Leaving aside some authors such as Putnam, the ontological and epistemological works of Quine, Chisholm, and others, actually had very little influence on the development of the philosophy of mind. Rather, the common attitude towards naturalism is to start with robust naturalism in presupposing that it is the only paradigm that deserves to be taken seriously. I am not saying that naturalism is false, but that fundamental philosophical problems such as intentionality and consciousness plausibly require more open-ended examination than is allowed by cognitive or evolutionary robust naturalism. It is thus tempting to say that the problem of consciousness as currently understood — how to naturalize consciousness? — is not a real philosophical problem, but an artifact due to the poverty and narrow-mindedness of the naturalist model itself. The existence of air and earth no doubt was a “hard problem” for Thales’s waterism, but this does not imply that it is a problem at all!

I think it is precisely the advantage of neo-Kantian anti-naturalism that it draws attention on the difficulties of treating the mind — intentionality and consciousness — merely on a par with physical features such as computer programs or biological functions. Again, I am not claiming that neo-Kantian anti-naturalism is true, and actually I doubt that it is. Nevertheless, it at least suggests that the account of intentionality and consciousness in terms of brain and behavioral functions is arguably no less problematic (or more explanatory) than the idealist or dualist approach in terms of independent mental entities. Perhaps one of the most interesting features of neo-Kantianism is that it shows the notion of physical reality itself to be a philosophical problem.

3. According to your view, what has yet to be discovered and / or reviewed in Neo-Kantianism? Which research remain deficient and should be fostered?

It is quite remarkable that the focus so far has been on the most extreme and questionable aspects of neo-Kantian philosophy, for example, on Cohen's logical idealism. It may be agreed, I think, that the recent criticism of "German" idealism from the point of view of so-called "Austrian philosophy" witnesses a healthy reaction against some of the perceived excesses of the Kantian tradition. However, the result of this is that both the weaknesses of robust realism and the fruitful insights of neo-Kantian anti-realism are thereby usually ignored. The truth, I think, must lie somewhere in between. It is doubtful that the neo-Kantian notion of a *constitution* of objective reality could be of any use to contemporary philosophers unless it is considered compatible with some form of realism, as it is, for example, in Husserl's neo-Kantian-inspired transcendental idealism.

The main deficiency of the neo-Kantian approach to philosophical issues, as I see it, lies in the fact that it makes any theory of experience impossible, or at least rather tricky. The most extreme version of the neo-Kantian depreciation of experience is to be found in Cohen's attempt to build up a theory of knowledge without appeal to concepts like "intuition," "datum," or "experience," with the result that knowledge was thereby reduced to "pure thought" conceived as a pure activity of producing objective reality. Although quite different, the Baden School's normative approach to knowledge leads to comparable conclusions. By defining object merely as what *ought* to be posited as existent in order for the corresponding judgment to be true, Rickert in fact claimed that it is not experience or intuition, but judgment that provides the criterion for objectivity.

A significant consequence of this is that it was also impossible for neo-Kantians to address philosophical issues on a real descriptive basis, which is why the neo-Kantian philosophy, as to its theoretical results, remains highly speculative. Certainly, most of the neo-Kantian philosophers were not as radical as Cohen. Natorp, for example, undertook to reintroduce experience into Cohen's idealism, and his psychology really displays close connections to Mach's empiricism. Note that Carnap, in his *Aufbau*, explicitly appropriated some aspects of Natorp's theory of objectification. This, of course, does not make him a Kantian (see the Margolis-Weissman debate on this question), but clearly suggests that both philosophers shared certain presuppositions as to the role of experience in knowledge. However, what Natorp considers to be "given" in "immediate experience" is precisely not given in the normal

sense. It is a “hypothesis” in Cohen’s sense, namely something that is always already lost and can only be approximated by objective construction or subjective reconstruction. This explains the astonishing descriptive poverty of Natorp’s psychology, when compared with Brentanian or physiological psychology. One is struck by the absence of descriptive materials in his psychological work. Natorp provides very few examples, and most of his assumptions are in fact supported by no observational data whatever. In his correspondence with Natorp, Husserl accused him of starting too high up, at the level of general principles, while the right method is rather “from below upwards” (*von unten*).

All in all, I think the most adequate attitude towards neo-Kantian philosophers today might well consist in integrating some of their insights into a more comprehensive framework. This is especially the case if we consider the eliminative approach to experience promoted by most of them. Certainly, there is much to be sympathetic with in the neo-Kantian view that the perceiving subject somehow constitutes his or her object. However, this view also saddles us with insoluble problems. It makes it practically impossible to account for the most basic features of experience such as perceptual time continuum, the figural organization of the sensory field, etc. Now, it seems undeniable that these features occur in knowledge and should be taken into account in the theory of knowledge. The fact that Cohen reduces knowledge to mathematical physics is an extreme example of the disastrous consequences of eliminating experience from the theory of knowledge. The world we “know” is not merely the constituted correlate of conceptual thought, it is also constituted “on the basis of” (in a sense still to be elucidated) temporally and spatially configured phenomena. In my view, an adequate appropriation of neo-Kantianism should first attempt to make the notion of constitution consistent with phenomenological facts. In a sense, that is what Husserl did, as well as Kant himself when he tried to combine Leibnizian rationalism with Locke’s and Hume’s empiricism. This would allow us to enlarge the neo-Kantians’ focus on judgment by giving more importance to how we are primarily acquainted with the world, and thus to turn to the neo-Kantians for help in order to reinstate criticism in a more acceptable way.