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neo-Kantianism

From "The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy"



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The diverse Kantian movement that emerged within German philosophy in the 1860s, gained a strong academic foothold in the 1870s, reached its height during the three decades prior to World War I, and disappeared with the rise of Nazism. The movement was initially focused on renewed study and elaboration of Kant's epistemology in response to the growing epistemic authority of the natural sciences and as an alternative to both Hegelian and speculative idealism and the emerging materialism of, among others, Ludwig Büchner (1824-99). Later neo-Kantianism explored Kant's whole philosophy, applied his critical method to disciplines other than the natural sciences, and developed its own philosophical systems. Some originators and/or early contributors were Kuno Fischer (1824-1907), Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-94), Friedrich Albert Lange (1828-75), Eduard Zeller (1814-1908), and Otto Liebmann (1840-1912), whose *Kant und die Epigonen* (1865) repeatedly stated what became a neo-Kantian motto, "Back to Kant!"

Several forms of neo-Kantianism are to be distinguished. T.K. Oesterreich (1880-1949), in **Friedrich Ueberwegs Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie** ("F.U.'s Compendium of the History of Philosophy", 1923), developed the standard, somewhat chronological, classification:

1. The physiological neo-Kantianism of Helmholtz and Lange, who claimed that physiology is "developed or corrected Kantianism."
2. The metaphysical neo-Kantianism of the later Liebmann, who argued for a Kantian "critical metaphysics" (beyond epistemology) in the form of "hypotheses" about the essence of things.
3. The realist neo-Kantianism of Alois Riehl (1844-1924), who emphasized the real existence of Kant's thing-in-itself.
4. The logistic-methodological neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School of Hermann Cohen (1842—1918) and Paul Natorp (1854—1924).
5. The axiological neo-Kantianism of the Baden or Southwest German School of Windelband (1848-1915) and Heinrich Rickert (1863—1936).
6. The relativistic neo-Kantianism of Georg Simmel (1858-1918), who argued for Kantian categories relative to individuals and cultures.
7. The psychological neo-Kantianism of Leonard Nelson (1882-1927), originator of the Göttingen School; also known as the neo-Friesian School, after Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773—1843), Nelson's self-proclaimed precursor. Like Fries, Nelson held that Kantian a priori principles cannot be transcendently justified, but can be discovered only through introspection.

Oesterreich's classification has been narrowed or modified, partly because of conflicting views on how distinctly "Kantian" a philosopher must have been to be called "neo-Kantian." The very term 'neo-Kantianism' has even been called into question, as suggesting real intellectual commonality where little or none is to be found. There is, however, growing consensus that Marburg and Baden neo-Kantianism were the most important and influential.

Marburg School

Its founder, Choen, developed its characteristic Kantian idealism of the natural sciences by arguing that physical objects are truly known only through the laws of these sciences and that these laws presuppose the application of Kantian a priori principles and concepts. Cohen elaborated this idealism by eliminating Kant's dualism of sensibility and understanding, claiming that space and time are construction methods of "pure thought" rather than a priori forms of perception and that the notion of any "given" (perceptual data) prior to the "activity" of "pure thought" is meaningless. Accordingly, Cohen reformulated Kant's thing-in-itself as the regulative idea that the mathematical description of the world can always be improved. Cohen also emphasized that "pure thought" refers not to individual consciousness—on his account Kant had not yet sufficiently left behind a "subject—object" epistemology—but rather to the content of his own system of a priori principles, which he saw as subject to change with the progress of science. Just as Cohen held that epistemology must be based on the "fact of science," he argued, in a decisive step beyond Kant, that ethics must transcendently deduce both the moral law and the ideal moral subject from a humanistic science—more specifically, from jurisprudence's notion of the legal person. This analysis led to the view that the moral law demands that all institutions, including economic enterprises, become democratic—so that they display unified wills and intentions as transcendental conditions of the legal person—and that all individuals become colegislators. Thus Cohen arrived at his frequently cited claim that Kant "is the true and real originator of German socialism." Other important Marburg Kantians were Cohen's colleague Natorp, best known for his studies on Plato and philosophy of education, and their students Karl Vorländer (1860-1928), who focused on Kantian socialist ethics as a corrective of orthodox Marxism, and Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945).

Baden School

The basic task of philosophy and its transcendental method is seen as identifying universal values that make possible culture in its varied expressions. This focus is evident in Windelband's influential insight that the natural sciences seek to formulate general laws—**nomothetic** knowledge—while the historical sciences seek to describe unique events—**idiographic** knowledge. This distinction is based on the values (interests) of mastery of nature and understanding and reliving the unique past in order to affirm our individuality. Windelband's view of the historical sciences as idiographic raised the problem of selection central to his successor Rickert's writings: How can historians objectively determine which individual events are historically significant? Rickert argued that this selection must be based on the values that are generally recognized within the cultures under investigation, not on the values of historians themselves. Rickert also developed the transcendental argument that the objectivity of the historical sciences necessitates the assumption that the generally recognized values of different cultures approximate in various degrees universally valid values. This argument was rejected by Weber, whose methodological work was greatly indebted to Rickert.

See also **Cassirer, Cohen, Kant, Lange, transcendental argument, Windelband.**
H.v.d.L.