

Introduction: towards a reconsideration of Neo-Kantianism

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In the summer of 1914, T. S. Eliot arrived in Marburg from Harvard University to attend a summer course in philosophy before taking up residency at Merton College, Oxford, for a year of study with Harold Joachim, F. H. Bradley's successor. At the University of Marburg, Eliot met Paul Natorp, who assisted him in finding affordable accommodation and lectured in his course on philosophy. The outbreak of the First World War would cut short Eliot's stay in Marburg, but not before he had the chance to sketch a portrait of the venerable Neo-Kantian Professor. Natorp strikes a professorial pose, one arm tucked behind his back, the other slung across his waist. With elven ears and bald cranium, the philosopher appears endearing in his otherworldliness. Natorp's face is hidden behind oval glasses, so large that they seem to constitute a hindrance rather than an aid to seeing reality.

Eliot's sketch can be seen as a visual epitome for how Neo-Kantianism appeared to a younger generation of intellectuals and philosophers who would come of age in the aftermath of a Europe laid waste through the cataclysm of the Great War. Eliot's amusing sketch is an apt illustration for what Hans-Georg Gadamer, who wrote his PhD dissertation on Plato under Natorp in 1922, characterized as the Neo-Kantian "calm and confident aloofness" engrossed in "complacent system-building." With slightly more bite, Hannah Arendt charged Neo-Kantianism with drowning philosophy "in a sea of boredom," thereby offering a softer version of the same hostility that spirited Martin Heidegger's confrontation with Ernst Cassirer at Davos in 1929.2 The perception of Neo-Kantianism at Eliot's alma mater was similarly unflattering. William James lampooned

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 230, 214.

² Hannah Arendt, "Martin Heidegger at Eighty," in M. Murray (ed.), *Heidegger and Modern*

Philosophy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 294.



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Heinrich Rickert's work as an "unspeakable triviality" and a "fanciful flight of ideas," against which Rickert could only protest the famous American psychologist's "personal unkindness."³

Time and historical perspective have not rendered more moderate or judicious this perception of Neo-Kantianism. Commenting on Peter Gordon's balanced account of the Davos disputation between Heidegger and Cassirer, Hans Sluga remarks:

Cassirer was no doubt an accomplished philosopher, an influential teacher, and above all a thoroughly decent and admirable human being, but he does not get close in stature to the much more problematic Heidegger, and he certainly also lacks the philosophical radicalism of a Wittgenstein, Foucault, or Derrida and the incisive scientific acumen of a Russell, Quine, or Rawls. Attempts to revive his fortunes are, I am afraid, doomed to failure.⁴

Even the noted Kant biographer Manfred Kuehn proclaims that, "one of the reasons why the Neo-Kantians' popularity has diminished is that their problems are no longer our problems," whereas "Kant, on the contrary, seems to have continued relevance."⁵

New Approaches to Neo-Kantianism proposes to challenge these commonplace assumptions by offering a fresh examination of the diverse and enduring contributions that the movement of Neo-Kantianism - in truth: a fractious constellation of different movements - has provided and still provides to various fields of philosophical inquiry. Contrary to Kuehn's representative judgment, many of the problems that defined Neo-Kantianism are still very much our own, and in large measure *due* to their Neo-Kantian heritage. Rather than accept a monolithic image of Neo-Kantianism or reduce its identity to trite generalizations, the fourteen essays in this volume explore anew its rich landscape by means of critical engagements with central themes of Neo-Kantian philosophy. Although the chapters in this volume range over the Neo-Kantian movement broadly, New Approaches to Neo-Kantianism does not claim to offer a comprehensive presentation or exhaustive history of Neo-Kantianism. Instead, this volume offers a constellation of chapters with numerous overlaps, divergent interpretations, and a variety of methodological approaches. Exemplary themes, debates, and figures of Neo-Kantianism are investigated for the purpose of establishing a more nuanced and

³ Heinrich Rickert, "Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie," *Kant Studien* 14 (1909), 169–228; here 173.

 $^{^4\} https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24626-continental-divide-heidegger-cassirer-davos$

Manfred Kuehn, "On Interpreting Kant Correctly: On the Kant of the Neo-Kantians," in S. Luft and R. Makreel (eds.), *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 113–131; here 128.



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vibrant understanding of Neo-Kantianism, thus hopefully stimulating as well as directing future explorations of its complex and contested philosophical legacy.

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Although the movement of Neo-Kantianism does not have a clearly defined historical beginning, emerging instead from a loose chorus of philosophical reactions to German Idealism during the 1820s and 1830s, it did have a clearly defined ending. Cassirer's exile to Sweden in 1935 after the Nazi ascension to power in 1933 marks the definitive end of a Neo-Kantian presence within German academic institutions. Cassirer's exile is equally symbolic of the kind of ending that befell Neo-Kantianism as a whole. Unlike Adorno, who returned to Europe after the Second World War, or Heidegger, who, despite his ambiguous internal exile during the war, found philosophical redemption in France, or Husserl, whose legacy was promoted through the establishment of the Husserl Archives in Leuven, Neo-Kantianism never returned to the European scene of philosophy. This total eclipse of Neo-Kantianism – the reasons for which are to be sure complex, as yet not thoroughly studied, and reaching back to the First World War - represents a defining event of twentieth-century philosophy, the significance of which still reverberates across the full spectrum of contemporary philosophy.

The purpose of this Introduction is not to provide a survey of Neo-Kantianism from its multiple points of origin in the early nineteenth century to its eclipse during the 1920s and 1930s (many of the chapters in this volume deal in detail with various episodes from this grand adventure), to hazard a general definition of Neo-Kantianism, to make an inventory of its different movements with philosophical etiquettes, or to decide who does or does not belong, or partly belong, to Neo-Kantianism "proper." Rather than promote an antiquarian or monumental approach to Neo-Kantianism, the fourteen contributors to this volume have been encouraged to adopt a critical approach based on their own methodological preferences, historical understanding, and argumentative position. For the purpose of situating the contributions to this volume, it is instructive to begin with two influential verdicts against Neo-Kantianism that substantially defined the philosophical—cultural

⁶ An early inventory claims to identify seven different types of Neo-Kantianism, see Friedrich Ueberweg, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* (Berlin: Mittler, 1923).



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memory of its ending.⁷ The first stems from Lukács, the second from Heidegger.

In *The Destruction of Reason*, Lukács, whose early thought was shaped by Emil Lask, writes: "Granted, we know that even after Hegel academic systems were created (Wundt, Cohen, Rickert, etc.), but we know also that they were totally insignificant for the evolution of philosophy."8 Even if we reject Lukács' dialectical materialist view of the history of philosophy, his underlying condemnation of Neo-Kantianism as historically "insignificant" is not untypical. Such an appraisal of Neo-Kantianism's historical "insignificance" assumes a certain reading of the history of modern philosophy as a Grand Narrative (whether of progress or decline) that passes through three points of inflection: "from Kant to Hegel" through the "hermeneutics of suspicion" of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud to the "parting of the ways" of twentieth-century philosophy into the movements of Analytic (or Anglo-Saxon) Philosophy, Continental Philosophy, and American Pragmatism. The teaching of the history of philosophy in European and North American philosophy departments bears out and reinforces the historical "insignificance" of Neo-Kantianism with the standard curricular division of courses into Early Modern, Kant and German Idealism, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Phenomenology, and Early Analytic Philosophy. On this image of the history of philosophy, largely constructed against Neo-Kantian historiography of philosophy during the latter half of the twentieth century, it is as if Neo-Kantianism effectively never occurred for the institutionalized memory of contemporary thought.

Lukács' judgment reflects a further commonplace association of Neo-Kantianism with a sterile form of academic philosophy. Lukács derides Neo-Kantianism as a *Professorensysteme* that remained isolated from the "concrete" historical and cultural forces of "world history." Such a characterization of Neo-Kantianism fails in part to recognize the essential contribution of Neo-Kantianism to the establishment of philosophy within the modern university. This institutionalization of philosophy, undoubtedly one of the more significant sociological transformations of

⁷ Important presentations of the development of Neo-Kantianism can be found in Klaus Christian Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press, 1991), Thomas Wiley, *Back to Kant* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), Manfred Pascher, *Einführung in den Neukantianismus* (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1977), and Hans-Ludwig Ollig, *Der Neukantianismus* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979). The best one-volume account remains Massimo Ferrari, *Introduzione al neocriticismo* (Rome: Laterza, 1997).

⁸ Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. P. Palmer (London: Merlin Press, 1980), 322.



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philosophy since the early modern revolt (Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Hume, etc.) against university-philosophy, or Scholasticism, enjoyed as its counterpart the formation of a European public space of philosophy with the founding of philosophical journals (for example: Kant-Studien), the organization of conferences, and an increased mobility and exchange of ideas across different European universities. If Neo-Kantianism represents sociologically the closure of any space for philosophy outside the academic university, then the institutional rootedness of professional philosophy today, its organization into different fields of expertise, competing schools, and professional organizations, can be seen as one of the more enduring legacies of Neo-Kantianism.

The charge that Neo-Kantianism remained an "aloof" (Gadamer) system of professorial/professional philosophy fails on another score to recognize the productive tension in its underlying conception of philosophy as both an autonomous discipline, demarcated from other sciences in terms of method and system, and a philosophical discipline necessarily situated vis-à-vis other scientific fields of knowledge. With the two main movements of the Marburg School and the Southwestern or Baden School, the philosophical reach of Neo-Kantianism represented at the time an historically unique interdisciplinary praxis, the likes of which has since never fully been matched in breadth or ambition. As significantly, the pervasive influence of Neo-Kantian thought on other disciplines, especially those new academic disciplines of the late nineteenth century for which the framework of Neo-Kantianism played a crucial role in their methodological formation (sociology, art history, modern jurisprudence, cognitive psychology), constitutes an important chapter in the development of modern forms of knowledge. This spectrum of different fields of knowledge that intersect within Neo-Kantianism is stressed in New Approaches to Neo-Kantianism with a number of chapters in this volume providing case studies of the specific contribution of Neo-Kantianism to art history, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of science, sociology, philosophy of religion, and theory of law. If one understands the universality of philosophy in terms of its ability to speak productively to disciplines other than itself, then Neo-Kantianism in this regard represents one of the last universal frameworks of philosophy, not because of its rigid system-building, but on the contrary due to its "pluralization" of rationality, as paradigmatically expressed in Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

If Neo-Kantianism has suffered from a perception of "historical insignificance," it has equally suffered from a widespread identification of its philosophical center of gravity with an exclusive concern with the problem

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of knowledge. In the 1929 Davos disputation between Heidegger and Cassirer, while Cassirer stressed a "functional" and "historical" understanding of Neo-Kantianism, Heidegger promoted a "substantialist" definition of Neo-Kantianism as essentially a theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*). As Heidegger argues:

We can only understand what is common to Neo-Kantianism on the basis of its origin. The genesis of [*Neo-Kantianism*] lies in the predicament of philosophy concerning the question of what properly remains of it in the whole of knowledge. Since about 1850 it has been the case that both the human and the natural sciences have taken possession of the totality of what is knowable, so that the question arises: what still remains of Philosophy if the totality of beings has been divided up under the sciences? It remains just a knowledge of science, not of beings.¹⁰

Heidegger's prejudice has since largely prevailed. Neo-Kantianism remains mostly known for its promotion of an "epistemological" interpretation of Kant (which still dominates current readings of Kant); it remains mostly associated with an overly "intellectual" account of knowledge; it remains wedded to a perceived uncritical dependency on the natural sciences, especially mathematical physics as the paradigmatic form of cognition, and an outmoded conception of the sciences and mathematics.

Yet, Heidegger's view of Neo-Kantianism and its historical genesis fails to acknowledge a more complex dynamic to the Neo-Kantian project of *Erkenntnistheorie*. The German term *Erkenntnistheorie* can be traced back to Friedrich Eduard Beneke's *Kant und die philosophische Aufgabe unserer Zeit (Kant and the Philosophical Task for our Times*), although it was not until Eduard Zeller's 1862 inaugural lecture in Heidelberg that the term *Erkenntnistheorie* began to enjoy widespread circulation (and hence diverse meanings) and function as an organizing signifier for the self-proclaimed project of Neo-Kantianism. ¹¹ Published in Berlin the year of Hegel's death in 1831, the title *Kant and the Philosophical Task for our Times* already signals

⁹ For studies of this encounter, see Peter Gordon, Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), Michael Friedman, A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), Cassirer – Heidegger. 70 Jahre Davoser Disputation (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2002), and Pierre Aubenque, "Le débat de 1929 entre Cassirer et Heidegger," in Ernst Cassirer: De Marbourg à New York, l'itinéraire philosophique (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1990), 81–96.

Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. R. Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 171–172.

Friedrich Eduard Beneke, Kant und die philosophische Aufgabe unserer Zeit (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler, 1832).



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how the Kantian task of an Erkenntnistheorie (as Beneke conceives it) is meant to provide a philosophical alternative to the dominance of German Idealism. The concept of Erkenntnistheorie must in fact be seen as an operative concept for three distinct questions: the question of philosophy; the question of knowledge; the question of culture and politics. From the beginning, the signifier "Erkenntnistheorie" operated within three domains of discourse: philosophy, knowledge, culture and politics.

As Julius Ebbinghaus, appointed to the chair of philosophy in Marburg in 1945, perceptively noted, the disqualification of Neo-Kantianism during the 1920s and 1930s entailed a rejection of a certain idea of philosophy. 12 This ending of Neo-Kantianism as the ending of a certain conception of philosophy reflects the centrality of the question "what is philosophy?" for the historical development and self-conception of Neo-Kantianism. The question "what is Neo-Kantianism?" cannot be approached without raising at the same time the question "what is philosophy?" As a number of chapters in this volume explore, different movements within Neo-Kantianism, as well as different stages within these movements, can be understood as different orientations within this metaphilosophical

Beneke's early use of the term *Erkenntnistheorie* reveals a second operative significance, which would become extended, contested, and transformed with further developments of Neo-Kantianism. Through his contact with John Herschel and William Whewell in England, Beneke sought to impart a new direction and renewed impetus to German thought away from German Idealism. Under the heading of Erkenntnistheorie, Beneke understood a science of experience that would continue Kant's critical concern with the conditions of possibility for knowledge, albeit through the application of psychology and in closer contact with the empirical sciences.¹³ Philosophy in this manner aspires to the status of the "science of the sciences" (die Wissenschaft der Wissenschaften), yet requires knowledge of the natural sciences, which, during the 1820s and 1830s, were beginning their rapid ascent within German universities, thus gradually displacing the Naturphilosophie of German Idealism. For later Neo-Kantians, this foundational relation between the science of philosophy and other sciences would remain central. Contrary to Heidegger's narrow assessment, this relationship (in methodological and

¹² Julius Ebbinghaus, "Hermann Cohen als Philosoph und Publizist," *Archiv für Philosophie* 6 (1956),

¹³ Friedrich Eduard Beneke, Lehrbuch der pragmatischen Psychologie (Berlin: Mittler & Sohn, 1853) and Skizzen der Naturlehre der Gefuehle (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1825).



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systematic terms) would undergo significant transformation in ways that reflected the evolution of the natural and human sciences in the late nineteenth century. In both the Marburg and Baden Schools, the scope of philosophy's interest in the sciences kept pace with the emergence of *new* sciences (ethnography, linguistics, etc.) as well as revolutions within established sciences (non-Euclidean geometry, number theory, logic of relations, etc.).

In advocating for an *Erkenntnistheorie* as the task of philosophy, Beneke repeatedly bemoans the "degeneration of German thought" and the "intellectual barbarism" of German Idealism. In addition to its metaphilosophical significance, the signifier "Erkenntnistheorie" was forged with cultural purpose. Already in its early expression with Beneke, the task of Erkenntnistheorie is implicitly to foster a renewal of (German) culture. It is not, however, until the 1848 March Revolution that the cultural and political significance of a new orientation towards Kant in terms of an Erkenntnistheorie as the future of German thought becomes more emphatically and widely advocated. In Christian Weisse's 1847 inaugural lecture In welchem Sinn die deutschen Philosophie jetzt wieder an Kant sich zu orientieren?, we hear a pronounced amplification of the more implicit connection between Kant's critical philosophy and the critical imperative for a reformation of German culture in Beneke, even if Weisse's own speculative theism departed from the thrust of Beneke's appeal to Kant's thinking.14

During the 1870s and the first decade of German unification, the inseparable connection between political and cultural liberalism and the Neo-Kantian project of *Erkenntnistheorie* became exemplified in the towering figure of Hermann Cohen, founder of the Marburg School, and whose decisive critique of psychological conceptions of Kant's critical philosophy (as with Beneke) ushered, as Heidegger recognizes, the second epoch in the development of Neo-Kantianism. ¹⁵ Cohen's appointment at the University of Marburg in 1873 represented the first appointment of an unconverted Jewish professor in Germany. His two promoters, Eduard Zeller, whose famous 1862 inaugural lecture in Heidelberg, *Über Bedeutung und Aufgabe der Erkenntnistheorie*, is the veritable launching point for the slogan *Zurück zu Kant!*, and Friedrich Albrecht Lange, whose innovative reading of Kant would influence

¹⁴ Christian H. Weisse, In welchem Sinn die deutschen Philosophie jetzt wieder an Kant sich zu orientieren? (Leipzig, 1847).

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, GA 56–57 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1987), 140.



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Cohen (even as Cohen contested its psychological leanings) as well as Vaihinger's *Philosophie des Als Ob*, were both cultural radicals. Zeller was a confessed atheist, who had studied with Bruno Bauer and David Strauss in Tübingen;¹⁶ Lange was a militant socialist who provided a critical impetus for the development of Kantian Socialism through his political engagement and political writings.¹⁷ An atheist, a social militant, and the first Jewish *Privantdozent* of philosophy in Germany launched Marburg Neo-Kantianism, the target of Heidegger's critical identification of Neo-Kantianism with *Erkenntnistheorie* in 1929.

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Philosophical slogans have always provided a useful shorthand for the selfpositioning of philosophical movements, but inevitably at the expense of a genuine understanding of the movement itself. The slogan "Back to Kant!" has fared no better. Launched during the 1860s, the combination of "back" and "Kant" unduly came to fix an image of Neo-Kantianism that in many regards obscured its actual development. Rather than a movement back, Neo-Kantianism imagined itself as a movement forwards, as most vividly expressed with the Kantian Socialism of Karl Vorländer's call Vorwärts mit Kant as an alternative to Marxism. Even the centrality of "Kant" is historically misleading, since Neo-Kantianism increasingly loosened its orientation towards Kant (and the crucial question: which Kant?, since Kant's three critiques found varied interpretations through-out Neo-Kantianism) as it developed and diversified historically. Cohen, whose conception of transcendental thought as dependent on the Faktum of the natural sciences, more than any other figure framed the historical perception of Neo-Kantianism as Erkenntnistheorie, himself progressively moved away from his own critical philosophy in the first decade of the twentieth century. In a 1905 review of Cohen's Logik der reinen Erkenntnis, Leonard Nelson (who influenced Karl Popper) chides Cohen for falling

Regrettably, Zeller's theological writings have been entirely forgotten. A significant exception: Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

As Henri Dussort remarks: "Mais la motivation la plus puissante de Lange est d'ordre éthique et politique. Sa vocation et sa figure sont avant tout celles d'un militant," L'École de Marbourg (Paris: PUF, 1963), 53. An excellent treatment of Lange's political thinking can be found in Thomas Wiley's Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought 1860–1914, chapter 4. See F. A. Lange, Die Arbeiterfrage. Ihrer Bedeutung für die Gegenwart und Zukunft (Duisburg: Bleuler-Haushier, 1865).

¹⁸ Karl Vorländer, Kant und der Socialismus under besonderer Berücksichtigung der neuesten theoretischen Bewegung innerhalb des Marxismus (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1900).



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into "a dogmatic ontology" or, in other words, into a "Hegelian ontology."19 In a lecture at Heidelberg in 1910, Windelband positively addresses a renewal of Hegelianism among contemporary German thought.20 This shift in the relationship of Neo-Kantianism towards Hegel spurred Rickert to claim that he considered the philosophy of Kant and Hegel as representing a fundamental unity.21 In the years prior to the outbreak of the First World War, who actually remained "Kantian" among the classic figures of Neo-Kantianism?

If T. S. Eliot had returned to Marburg after the war, he would have discovered a very different Natorp. The First World War was an intellectual and cultural catastrophe for Neo-Kantianism.²² In an ironic twist, the demise of Neo-Kantianism precipitated by the war reflected in reverse the original historical situation of its beginnings: in a 1920 article published in Kant-Studien, "Der Neukantianismus und die Forderung der Gegenwart" – a marvelous echo of Beneke's 1831 title – Karl Sternberg calls for a renewal of Neo-Kantian thought through a critical reflection on its historical development in the aftermath of the war.²³ After contributing to the "war-philosophy" undertaken by many German (and European) professors, Natorp abandoned his orientation towards the Marburg Neo-Kantianism which had so thoroughly defined his prewar thinking - Cohen had even once considered Natorp's writings as too infused with Neo-Kantian convictions.²⁴ In his 1922–1923 lecture course Philosophische Systematik, Natorp began to re-create himself as another kind of philosopher.²⁵ The primacy of *Erkenntnistheorie* (so critically rejected by Heidegger in 1929) became displaced by a new philosophy of origins centered on the primacy of ontology. 26 The problem of knowledge now becomes anchored in an original foundation of being; that there is being (es gibt) is not to be conflated with what is a being – the true

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¹⁹ Leonard Nelson, "Rezension von Hermann Cohen: System der Philosophie. 1. Teil. Logik der reinen Erkenntnis," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1973), 11: 1–28.

²⁰ Wilhem Windelband, "Die Erneuerung des Hegelianismus," in *Präludien I* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1907), 273–289.

²¹ Heinrich Rickert, System der Philosophie (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1921), xi.

²² For the reaction of German (and British) philosophers to the war, Peter Hoeres, Krieg der Philosophen (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004). The impact of the war on Neo-Kantianism as a whole has yet to be studied.

²³ Karl Sternberg, "Der Neukantianismus und die Forderung der Gegenwart," *Kant-Studien* 25 (1920), 396–410.

²⁴ Heinz Holzhey, *Cohen und Natorp* (Basel: Schwabe, 1986), 1: 6.

²⁵ Posthumously published: Paul Natorp, *Philosophische Systematik*, ed. H. Natorp (Hamburg: Felix

²⁶ See Éric Dufour, Paul Natorp. De la psychologie générale à la systématique philosophique (Paris: Vrin, 2010), especially section 11.