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## The polemic between Leonard Nelson and Ernst Cassirer on the critical method in the philosophy\*

**Abstract:** The subject of the paper is a polemic between Leonard Nelson and Ernst Cassirer mainly concerning the understanding of the critical method in philosophy. Nelson refutes the accusation of psychologism and attacks the core of the philosophy of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism. In response to those allegations, Cassirer feels obliged to defend the position of his masters and performs this task brilliantly. The present paper considers similarities and differences in the positions of both sides in this debate. I try to evaluate the arguments of both sides and argue that they took basically the same positions, while the existing discrepancies did not justify such an intense polemic. If the disputing sides had approached the discussion in a less emotional way, it could have led to substantive and interesting conclusions.

**Keywords:** Leonard Nelson, Ernst Cassirer, Marburg School, Neo-Kantianism, critical method

Nelson was known in Germany for rediscovering the philosophy of Fries.<sup>1</sup> This was caused by the confrontation between Nelson and Cassirer, who were representatives of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism. An important point in this debate was Nelson's sharp critique of this School in his texts *Die kritische Methode und*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A.J. Noras: *Historia neokantyzmu*. Katowice 2012, p. 378f; cf. F. Biagioli: *Introduzione*. In: *Ernst Cassirer — Leonard Nelson. Una controversia sul metodo critico*. Ed. F. Biagioli. Morcelliana 2011, pp. 5f.

das *Verhältnis der Psychologie zur Philosophie* (1904) and *Jakob Friedrich Fries und seine jüngsten Kritiker* (1905).<sup>2</sup> Nelson's review of Cohen's book *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (1902) provoked Cassirer to face this criticism in his work *Der kritische Idealismus und die Philosophie des „gesunden Menschenverstandes“* (1906).<sup>3</sup> Cassirer and Nelson levelled a number of accusations at each other's views and raised a fundamental question about the Kantianism of their philosophical approaches, in particular concerning the understanding of the critical method. The discussion between Nelson and Cassirer of the notion of critical method affects many aspects and should be treated as a debate in which two different directions within the framework of Neo-Kantianism were confronted. So, mainly we have to deal with a discussion on the critical method between two Neo-Kantian directions, that is, between the Marburg School and the Neo-Friesian School.

This dispute between Nelson and the Marburg School had a significant influence on his academic career. His treatise *Die kritische Methode und das Verhältnis der Psychologie zur Philosophie*, in which he attempts to develop the psychology of introspection as the final source of knowledge regarding the doctrine of Fries, was rejected many times because of his criticism and the intransigence of Cohen's philosophy: twice promoted as a doctoral thesis (in 1902/03 in Berlin and in 1903/04 in Göttingen) and later in 1906 as a habilitation thesis in Göttingen.<sup>4</sup> Nelson first tried to gain a doctoral degree with his treatise on the critical method in Berlin with Carl Stumpf and then he undertook the second attempt at the end of the winter semester 1903/04 in Göttingen. His book *Jakob Friedrich Fries und seine jüngsten Kritiker* (1904), concentrating on the so-called Kant-Friesian problem, was accepted as a dissertation by Julius Baumann, and Nelson took an oral examination on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 1904. Nelson's sharp, critical, and uncompromising approach negatively affected his scholarly career, especially after 1905, when his polemic against Cohen was published in the "Göttingschen

<sup>2</sup> L. Nelson: *Die kritische Methode und das Verhältnis der Psychologie zur Philosophie: Ein Kapitel aus der Methodenlehre*, Sonderdruck aus den "Abhandlungen der Fries'schen Schule." Göttingen 1904; L. Nelson: *Jakob Friedrich Fries und seine jüngsten Kritiker*. Göttingen 1905.

<sup>3</sup> E. Cassirer: *Der kritische Idealismus und die Philosophie des »gesunden Menschenverstandes«* (1906). In: *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften (1902—1921)*, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9, Hamburger Ausgabe, Darmstadt 2004, pp. 3—36; H. Cohen: *System der Philosophie*. Theil 1: *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*. Berlin 1902.

<sup>4</sup> T. Kononowicz, P. Waszczenko: *Wstęp*. In: *O sztuce filozofowania*. Kraków 1994, p. 9.

gelehrten Anzeigen". There he accused Cohen of lacking knowledge of Kant's philosophy and the dogmatism of the pre-Kantian philosophy.<sup>5</sup> The rejection of his book on the critical method as his habilitation thesis is thus hardly surprising. Eventually, Nelson earned a professorial position in 1908 with his work *Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Kantischen Erkenntnistheorie*, in which he expressed appreciation of the Göttingen scholars and mathematicians at the Science of Nature Faculty of the University of Göttingen.<sup>6</sup> The habilitation brought little change to his academic career since it was not until eleven years later, in June 1919, that he was appointed associate professor in Göttingen and nominated for the position of Georg Misch — after Hilbert's intervention. This nomination triggered Nelson's dispute with Edmund Husserl, who had come into conflict with Göttingen mathematicians.

The main goal of Cassirer's essay *Der kritische Idealismus...* is to explore Nelson's attacks presented in his treatise *Die kritische Methode...*. In this regard, Cassirer makes the following allegation against Nelson:

Sein Stil trägt überall dem Tagesgeschmack Rechnung, den seine Philosophie zu bekämpfen behauptet. Nicht in ruhiger und sachlicher Erörterung werden die Grundlagen der Friesschen Lehre vor uns klargelegt, sondern immer wieder lenkt die Betrachtung zu polemischen Exkursen ab und ergeht sich in pathetischen Beteuerungen oder Angriffen. Die Art, in der Nelson die Gegner der Friesschen Auffassung abzufertigen sucht, kann nur zur Verwirrung, nicht zur Klärung des eigentlichen Streitpunktes dienen. Nirgends gönnt er ihnen eine klare und zusammenfassende Darstellung ihrer Ansicht; immer von neuem unterbricht er sein Referat mit höhnischen Glossen und Zwischenbemerkungen.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> L. Nelson: *Hermann Cohen: System der Philosophie. 1. Teil: Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*. "Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen" (167), no 8, 1905, pp. 610—630; L. Nelson: *Rezension von Hermann Cohen: System der Philosophie. 1. Teil: Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*. In: *Gesammelte Schriften*. vol. 2, 1973, pp. 1—27; Cf. auch Helmut Holzhey, ed., 98. *Natorp an Görland*. In: *Cohen und Natorp. Der Marburger Neukantianismus in Quellen. Zeugnisse kritischer Lektüre, Briefe der Marburger, Dokumente zur Philosophiepolitik der Schule*. Vol. 2. Basel/Stuttgart 1986.

<sup>6</sup> L. Nelson, *Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Kantischen Erkenntnistheorie*. "Abhandlungen der Fries'schen Schule. Neue Folge" (3), no 1 1912, pp. 33—96; L. Nelson: *Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Kantischen Erkenntnistheorie*. "Gesammelte Schriften" (2) 1973, pp. 404—457.

<sup>7</sup> E. Cassirer: *Der kritische Idealismus...*, p. 4.

The objective of this contentious polemic is to show the essence of Nelson's philosophy, which would allow a proper evaluation of its importance and position in the history of philosophy. After recapitulating Nelson's theory, Cassirer makes his negative judgment. The reason for Cassirer's frustration is located in his belief that philosophy as well as the critique of knowledge is put „in place of blind faith to justify the principles" that should be exhibited not only empirically, but in their necessity and objective validity as the logical principles.<sup>8</sup>

### Nelson's Allegations

The confrontation concerns the method of critical philosophy and the distinction between dogmatic and critical forebears, which is the essence of Neo-Kantian philosophy. It is shown by Nelson in the following way:

Nennen wir danach dogmatisch das Verfahren einer Wissenschaft, die von der Aufstellung ihrer Prinzipien ausgeht, kritisch das Verfahren einer Wissenschaft, die auch ihre Prinzipien einer Prüfung unterwirft, so werden wir sagen können, daß für die Philosophie alles auf ein kritisches Verfahren ankomme und daß der Kritizismus in der Philosophie in der Befolgung der regressiven und daß der Kritizismus in der Philosophie in der Befolgung der regressiven Methoden besehe.<sup>9</sup>

The examination of the principles at the beginning demonstrates very clearly the relationship between Neo-Kantianism and Nelson's position because every Neo-Kantian must accept Kant's distinction between dogmatic and critical forebears. Already at the beginning of the investigation, Nelson finds in relation to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason that he understands "under the critique of the reason the proof of metaphysical judgments on the grounds of their possibil-

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> L. Nelson: *Die kritische Methode und das Verhältnis der Psychologie zur Philosophie: Ein Kapitel aus der Methodenlehre*. In: *Gesammelte Schriften in neun Bänden: Die Schule der kritischen Philosophie und ihre Methode*. Vol. 1. Hamburg 1970, p. 14.

ity.”<sup>10</sup> This motif of examining the known truths is very much a repetition of his earlier claims,<sup>11</sup> so it cannot be called accidental, but must be regarded as essential.

The difference between Nelson and Cassirer lies in the understanding of the critical method of philosophy that must presuppose a regressive method regarding Fries and Appelt. Nelson’s concept of critical method is rooted in his understanding of philosophy as the controversy over abstract principles. It shows traces of philosophical principles characteristic of the regressive method, often unconscious and prerequisite in the present judgments and assessments. It is all about the abstracting process: not the inference of consequences from their reasons but, conversely, the inference from the consequences to the reasons for the principles.<sup>12</sup> The evidence does show by inference that a thesis or a theorem is correct based on the principles adopted.<sup>13</sup> The regressive process serves the transformation of darkness based on our judgments and assessments into clear and conscious outspoken principles. Nelson finds this process relatively easy in a view founded on judgments. The basic problem is that our knowledge begins only partly with intuition. The task of philosophy as a science lies in the finding of this pure spring of concepts and principles of their collection from their original darkness to clarity of consciousness. Without the fulfilment of this task through regressive study, philosophy falls into the “arbitrariness of dogmatic metaphysics.”

In his understanding of the regressive method, Nelson refers to a non-intuitive direct knowledge based on metaphysical judgments.<sup>14</sup> Nelson’s concept of non-intuitive immediate knowledge as the basis of all metaphysics goes even further when connecting the dispute over error and truth only with indirect knowledge of reflection: “All error and doubt belongs to the reflection and cannot touch the intuition.”<sup>15</sup> The principle of immediate knowledge is not excluded by Nelson from critical examination. Nelson’s principle of immediate knowledge is an uncritical, even dogmatic, point in his philosophy, when he concludes:

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. L. Nelson: *Die Unmöglichkeit der Erkenntnistheorie. Vortrag gehalten am 11. April 1911 auf dem 4. internationalen Kongress für Philosophie in Bologna*. “Abhandlungen der Fries’schen Schule. Neue Folge” (3) 1912, p. 594 (12).

<sup>12</sup> L. Nelson: *Die kritische Methode...*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Aber wir waren bisher der Meinung, daß die Philosophie, daß insbesondere die Erkenntniskritik die Aufgabe hätte, an Stelle des blinden Glaubens die Rechtfertigung der Prinzipien zu setzen, daß sie nicht nur die tatsächliche empirische Anwendung der logischen Grundsätze aufzuweisen, sondern auch deren Notwendigkeit und objektive Gültigkeit darzutun hätte. Jetzt sehen wir, daß ebendiese Ansicht das Vorurteil ist, das uns von der unbefangenen Würdigung des Nelsonschen »Standpunktes« noch trennt.<sup>16</sup>

The acceptance of immediate knowledge by Nelson disappointed Cassirer, for whom critical philosophy was to justify the task rather than the principles of blind faith.

Nelson meant, as did Fries and Meyer, that psychologically understood deduction must be regarded as the essence of Kant's philosophy.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, the deduction of metaphysical principles was strictly connected with its psychology. This psychology is concerned with perception as one of two basic sources of knowledge. The primacy of intuition in opposition to the reflection is that intuition — in Nelson's opinion — can never be untrue. In connection with this point, Cassirer showed a contradiction in Nelson's idea.

On the misunderstood concept of deduction, Nelson says of Fries' reproach concerning the „prejudice of the transcendental” that „the fundamental mistake of the whole Post-Kantian dogmatism” lies in „mixing psychological and philosophical principles.”<sup>18</sup> Nelson considers the transcendental critique as an empirical science with a priori knowledge of the object. So, we have to distinguish precisely between the object and the content of transcendental criticism because they are dissimilar: The object of criticism is philosophical knowledge as a kind of a priori knowledge, and its content remains transcendental knowledge, which has a psychological character. Transcendental means a kind of metaphilosophical knowledge that, in contrast to the a priori knowledge of philosophy itself, can only be known a posteriori in the inner experience.

This disapproval of the wrongly understood criticism by the Post-Kantian was the real reason for Cassirer's reaction because Nelson relates it directly to Cohen's *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*.<sup>19</sup> Nel-

<sup>16</sup> E. Cassirer: *Der kritische Idealismus...*, pp. 9—10.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. L. Nelson: *Die kritische Methode...*, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 43; H. Cohen: *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 2nd ed. Berlin 1885, p. 294.

son opposes the metaphysical antipsychologism of the Marburg School, because it did not disconnect the transcendental deduction from the evidence. Nelson's provision is very strong, while he refers directly to "the correct understanding and a healthy development of the critical philosophy." In recognition that the transcendental investigation of a priori knowledge can be only a priori, so that the "transcendental investigation of the reason for the possibility of the a priori knowledge" should itself be the reason for their ability, Nelson finds "the confusion of the psychological reasons for the criticism with the logical reasons for the system."<sup>20</sup> In connection thereto, Nelson asks the fundamental question of the possibility of such an idea of a priori knowledge without basing it on direct knowledge. It is obvious that Cassirer, as a conscious successor of the Marburg School, opposed and objected to this negative image.

Nelson's criticism was designed to be a world view, such as idealism or materialism, but as a method it opposes dogmatism and scepticism in the following way: "The criticism is meant as a method and not a philosophical system."<sup>21</sup> This methodological criticism is defined by him as opposed to the results of the critical method. However, one may have doubts about his definition when he shows the difference between criticism and dogmatism on objective grounds in the evidence or in comparison with the objects of the truth of philosophical knowledge. In this connection, Cassirer attacked Nelson's concept of criticism as not critical.

In this context, we should consider Nelson's uncompromising criticism of Cohen's logic, published by him in the "Göttingschen gelehrten Anzeigen" as the review of Cohen's *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*.<sup>22</sup> His review already includes the following assessment: "In fact the reader will be disappointed of this titled as *Logic of Pure Knowledge* book if he expected something like this, which the educated humanity of Aristotle to Kant has referred as a logic."<sup>23</sup> So, Nelson reveals his negative position — without any semblance of impartiality — that Cohen's thinking has a mystical character. His interpretation of Cohen's logic of pure reason can by no means be described as well-intentioned, because it assumes the negative intention of the author in advance.

<sup>20</sup> L. Nelson: *Die kritische Methode...*, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> L. Nelson: *Rezension von Hermann Cohen: System der Philosophie. 1. Teil: Logik der reinen Erkenntnis...*; cf. H. Holzhey: *Einleitung*. In: H. Cohen: *Werke*. Vol. 6. Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 2005, pp. XVIII—XX.

<sup>23</sup> L. Nelson: *Rezension von Hermann Cohen: System der Philosophie...*, p. 3.



At the centre of Nelson's criticism is Cohen's principle of the infinitesimal method of his logic. It is Nelson's comparison with the results of the mathematical sciences that shows the notion of an infinitely small size was precisely defined by mathematics as non-existing in some mystical sense.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to the results of mathematical research, this exactness in Cohen's reflections does not suggest its meaning was changed within the logic of pure knowledge; Nelson expresses it as follows:

Die eigene Ansicht des Verfassers [Cohens — T.K.] läuft darauf hinaus, daß dem Unendlichkleinen nicht nur eine selbständige Bedeutung und Existenz zukommen soll, sondern daß in ihm sogar das Ursprungs- und Erzeugungsprinzip für das Endliche liegt.<sup>25</sup>

Nelson thus reproaches Cohen for applying a non-mathematical meaning to the notion of infinitely small, which changes its meaning in an important way when it is considered to exist as something. To justify this accusation, Nelson refers to selected fragments of Cohen's book, such as "Folglich ist das Unendlichkleine als Realität auszuzeichnen," where the author allegedly explicitly mentions the reality of infinitely small size. However, this is not what Cohen originally claimed. For this reason, Nelson's conviction of the infinitely small as a realistic view of Cohen's concept should be assessed as groundless; it is just a misinterpretation that cannot be justified in the context of the doctrine of the Marburg School. The reason for this misinterpretation can be explained in the strict context of the *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, in which Cohen very clearly states the negative view of the number as the real thing.<sup>26</sup> The number is not a real object, but a real reference point for the knowledge, with which Nelson, based on the assumption of epistemological impossibility, could not agree. In this sense, the reality is referred to merely as a specific requirement and direction of pure thinking, exaggerated by empiricism to become the main principle of epistemology. It is self-evident and does not contain any contradiction that the idealist epistemology of the Marburg School would want to explain in relation to the so-called 'real' reality, and Nelson shows much malevolence in his misreading.

Nelson refers negatively to Cohen's development of Kant's system and calls it a „relapse into dogmatic ontology" of Reinhold and Fich-

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. H. Cohen: *System der philosophie...*, p. 111.



te.<sup>27</sup> Here we can see that the basis of the dispute between Nelson and the Marburg School are the other traditions of Kantianism; Nelson philosophizes in connection with Fries' interpretation of Kant's doctrine against Cohen as well as Cassirer in this direction of the Kantian philosophy, as initiated by Reinhold and Fichte, among others.

This division has its implications in the Kantian doctrine of the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments that constitutes the core of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, because it forms a fundamental border between logic and metaphysics. For this reason, Kant must be of great significance for Cohen's logic of pure knowledge. Here we see an important distinction between two philosophers that makes, in Nelson's opinion, "the whole undertaking of Cohen's logic to naught."<sup>28</sup> The pulling down of the barriers between logic and metaphysics leads to the Hegelian doctrine of incompleteness and further variability of terms, which Nelson summarizes in the following way:

Kurz, wir befinden uns mitten in der Hegelschen Ontologie, nur daß hier an die Stelle des dialektischen Umschlagens der Begriffe die Erzeugung derselben aus dem Nichts vermöge der infinitesimalen Kontinuität gesetzt ist. Dies ist das folgerichtige Ende des mißverstandenen Kantianismus, der sich in ihm selbst richtet.<sup>29</sup>

This summary shows very clearly that Nelson's confrontation with the Kantian Criticism of Cohen has its actual source in the separation between the two Neo-Kantian schools. Nelson did not understand the dynamic conception of the term of the Marburg school because he did not want to acknowledge it.

### Cassirer's Defence

Cassirer protested that Nelson underappreciated the modern development of the issues of immediate and non-intuitive principles of

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. L. Nelson: *Rezension von Hermann Cohen: System der Philosophie...*, pp. 25—26.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

metaphysics as in the teaching of Descartes, who had just talked about the criterion of “clear and distinct perception” as the supreme principle of all certainty. Intuition is not a sufficient reason for these truths, but only to the “clear and distinct concepts of our minds.” In this way, metaphysical concepts, such as an idea of God, are referred to as the content and products of pure reason, which must not be generated by immediate apprehension, but by our reflection and self-conscious thinking. Cassirer relates “The concept of clear and distinct perception [...] to the actual historical and factual crisis of Cartesian philosophy,” not only for empirical opponents, but also within rationalism.<sup>30</sup> This kind of intuition was abandoned by empiricists and rationalists in modern epistemology and was just on the edge of philosophy in the common sense doctrine of the Scottish school of Thomas Reid and James Beattie as a „last stop and base.” This is why Cassirer comes to the following conclusion:

Nelson täuscht sich über die wahren geschichtlichen Ursprünge seines Systems, wenn er sich als Reformator der Friesschen Lehre fühlt: Was er in Wahrheit ergriffen und wiederhergestellt hat, das ist die altbekannte Philosophie des „Common sense“.<sup>31</sup>

Cassirer has another image of Nelson’s »scheme« of the history. It is a critique, not of the content of the same theoretical and practical principles, but of the method of line-up of principles that remained outdated. Cassirer identifies Nelson’s Neo-Friesianism with the Scottish School and the distinction between intuition and reflection prompts him to identify Nelson’s concept of intuition with that of common sense: “What Nelson here intuition calls, this is by Beattie designated and determined in the conception of »common sense«.”<sup>32</sup> If non-removable intuition has no degrees of probability and uncertainty, as Nelson claimed, it is precisely this fundamental view of the epistemology put forward by the Scottish School. Nelson’s view on the history of philosophy subsumes the conviction of the uniqueness of the critical philosophy of the trio Kant-Fries-Apelt and is not based on the history of philosophy.

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<sup>30</sup> E. Cassirer: *Der kritische Idealismus...*, p. 15; cf. E. Cassirer: *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*. In: *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit, Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 2. Hamburger Ausgabe. Darmstadt 2004, Buch 3, Kap. 2.

<sup>31</sup> E. Cassirer: *Der kritische Idealismus...*, p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Cassirer also notes Nelson's misinterpretation in relation to the Neo-Kantian view on Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, when Nelson showed Kant's fundamental error in the reflection and trial of transcendental proof of the metaphysical principles. In Cassirer's opinion, Nelson brought Kant's critique of reason to its true centre and inconsistently recognized it as the basis of true philosophy.<sup>33</sup> The basic lack of the critique of reason is the disregard for the immediate knowledge of reason, on which intellect can be based and form synthetic a priori judgments. Kant tried in vain to find truthfulness of the reflection itself through the analytic relationship between the experience and its more fundamental principles. Nelson acknowledged the possibility of deriving direct certain knowledge of reason from pure concepts in the sense of the Cartesian innate natural light of rationalism of the Leibniz-Wolff School.<sup>34</sup> This was seen by Cassirer as an uncritical, and even dogmatic, interpretation of Kant's doctrine. According to the Marburg School, Kant's deduction can only come from the concept of the possibility of the experience and cannot proceed from the mere "psychological demonstration of a sentence in the inner observation," as Nelson wanted. Here we see the focus of the dispute between the two Neo-Kantian directions. With this background, Cassirer refutes Nelson's conception of Kant's doctrine.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Cassirer has the right to own the interpretation of Kant's legacy as disputed by Nelson in the other sense as a Marburger interpretation, which is consistent with the typical Neo-Kantian heterodox understanding of Kant's Critique. Cassirer's emotional response only justifies Nelson's brutal attack on the philosophical basis of his school.

Cassirer questions the interpretation of Kant's theory further and asks about the concept of regressive method in view of the principle of the conservation of energy by Nelson, deciding on the nature of Nelson's philosophical critique.<sup>36</sup> Cassirer doubts that Nelson, or even some naturalists, really could assure the truth of the energy principle in the direct psychological view of "inner experience." Cassirer believes that Nelson's regressive method, contrary to his intention, leads to empiricism with his sensualistic interpretation of the principles and criticisms against the a priori character of persistence because he cannot show the priority of the inner over the external experience in a methodological way.<sup>37</sup> To achieve and take pos-

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 22–23.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 24.

session of basic psychological facts, we need the abstraction that still proceeds from data given to us by inner experience. These changeable realities must be processed through abstraction and the result of this process has only “conditional and hypothetical validity.”<sup>38</sup> If criticism should consist of generally valid and necessary sentences, it must arise from criticism of the system, although these requirements are met by Nelson. In connection with Nelson's rejection, the proof of metaphysical propositions loses its meaning. The certainty of each philosophical principle, therefore, depends on the respective state of empirical science, and every principle so far kept as irrevocable has “only a certain degree of probability and has to be corrected by future experience at any time.”<sup>39</sup> This is why Cassirer believes that, in contrast to Fries' and Apelt's derivation of metaphysical principles, Nelson does not see security and completeness because he rejects the Kantian table of judgments for its incompleteness and non-necessity. Nelson does not propose any alternative solution and that is why “in truth all randomness of »introspection« remains and propels without control on the vast seas of »inner experience«.”<sup>40</sup> In this connection, Cassirer criticizes Nelson's concept of the critique for its instrumentalization.<sup>41</sup>

Nelson's view is based on his interpretation of Kant's fundamental problem of the object being accessible only by »inner experience« in the process of thinking and not of the conditions of the empirical object itself.<sup>42</sup> Cassirer is of the opinion that such a conception of the “boundary between the subjective and objective proofs” blurs and, thus, leads to a tautology in dealing with the basic problem of philosophy: “the material to which all scientific and philosophical research refers is only in contents of consciousness.”<sup>43</sup> The consequence is a co-ordination of all scientific and philosophical disciplines that does not take into account their specific character and, in particular, their method or procedures.<sup>44</sup> The determination of consciousness as a permanent and unchanging feature of any science and philosophy is tautological in relation to the object of knowledge and should be regarded as fruitless and unavailing. The subject is one of two reference points of the knowledge relationship and rather important

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Cf. L. Nelson: *Die Kritische Methode...*, p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> E. Cassirer: *Der kritische Idealismus...*, p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

in determining this relationship. In this determination of tautology as the starting point, Cassirer is of course right. We can argue whether it is a successful defence against the allegation of the impossibility of the epistemology: although Cassirer criticizes Nelson because of the ambiguity of his proofs of impossibility, he presents no systematic analysis of his arguments.

Irrespective of this, Cassirer's criticism of the tautology in considering inner experience as the basis of metaphysical principles is valid, because it exposes the error of the *Idem per Idem*, that is, a circular definition with the definiens repeating literally, directly or indirectly the definiendum. This is no definition at all. Rather, it is a logical triviality of Nelson's statement, which refers to a very simple structure of the proof in the medieval concept of trivium curriculum. However, the charge of tautology levelled against Nelson's trivial statement, justified as it might be, cannot explain the composite character and diversity of science.

## Conclusion

In his article, Cassirer defended the doctrine of his master, Hermann Cohen, against Nelson's criticism of *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*.<sup>45</sup> The controversy concerns the concept of infinite size, which is a prerequisite and intellectual condition of reality in the scientific sense. Nelson opposed Cohen's view that infinitely small size may not mean the existence of infinitely small quantities in a mathematically definable meaning and that no originating and generating principle could be meant for the finite. Cassirer accused Nelson of misreading Cohen's doctrine. He pointed out that Cohen pursued the way of the true founders of analysis of the infinite, such as Leibniz, Newton, Euler, and MacLaurin, who actually thought of the concept of infinitely small size only as methods. Thus, Cohen blocked the hypostatization to things existing by themselves and Nelson misinterpreted as self-evident that "das Infinitesimale nicht als Ding, sondern als Bedingung, nicht als eine irgendwie vorhandene

<sup>45</sup> Cf. E. Cassirer: *Der kritische Idealismus...*, p. 33, footnote 61.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote 61.

Wirklichkeit, sondern als ein gedankliches Instrument zur Entdeckung und zum Aufbau des wahrhaften Seins zu gelten habe."<sup>46</sup> Cassirer protested that Nelson's misinterpretation was contrary to the proper intention of Cohen's concept of the infinitely small. Cohen did not posit the existence of infinitely small things so that they could be understood as metaphysical realities. This conclusion would be in contradiction to the anti-metaphysical thought of the Marburg School. Regarding Nelson's review, Cassirer came to the following conclusion:

Außer diesem Einwand gegen das Infinitesimale aber, dem sich, so verkehrt er ist, doch allenfalls noch ein sachlicher Sinn abgewinnen läßt, findet sich in der ganzen langen Kritik Nelsons auch nicht ein einziges positives Argument. Was übrigbleibt, sind einzig und allein gehässige Entstellungen und Schmähungen. Keinem Begriff wird die feste terminologische Bedeutung, keinem Gedanken der innere sachliche Zusammenhang gelassen, die sie innerhalb der »Logik der reinen Erkenntnis« besitzen; überall werden nur einzelne Sätze herausgerissen, um sie mit höhnischen Randbemerkungen zu versehen.<sup>47</sup>

In this context, it should be said that Cassirer's rejection of Nelson's allegations was in principle correct, but the adversaries went about it the wrong way: an interesting philosophical confrontation between two Neo-Kantian directions could have provided many important conclusions. Unfortunately, its participants did not rise to the task, so their discussion only generated worse misinterpretations and from the impartial observer's viewpoint must be disapproved.

The polemic between Nelson and Cassirer refers in fact to the essence of Neo-Kantianism and includes the question of its narrow and broader sense. It is very difficult to determine the extent of the term Neo-Kantianism. These difficulties show in textbooks on the history of philosophy, classifying Nelson's philosophy differently. According to some authors, he belongs to a specific variant of Neo-Kantianism, but others exclude him with his Neo-Friesian School from this philosophical tradition. As for Cassirer, compared with other historians of philosophy, he understands the Neo-Kantian very narrowly, as in his essay on Neo-Kantianism in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from 1946.<sup>48</sup> However, not all historians of philosophy agree with Cassirer.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 34, footnote 61.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. E. Cassirer: *Neo-Kantianism*. In: *Encyclopedia Britannica. A New Survey of Universal Knowledge*. Vol. 16: *Mushroom to Ozonides*. Chicago—London—Toronto

Traugott Konstantin Österreich, who formed the widely accepted classification of Neo-Kantianism, presented in the twelfth edition of the *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* of Überweg (1923), considers Nelson along with his Neu-Friesianische School to represent psychologically oriented Neo-Kantianism.<sup>49</sup> Nowadays, Nelson is understood in a similar way by Andrzej J. Noras as well as Tadeusz Gadacz.<sup>50</sup> Based on this discussion about Nelson's affiliation to Neo-Kantianism, we can perceive the main positions on the essence of the critical method.

Nelson accused not only Cohen of the underestimation of Fries' philosophy, but also Kuno Fischer, Wilhelm Windelband, and Alois Riehl.<sup>51</sup> His 'hypercriticism' shows, on the one hand, his aspiration to search for the truth; however, on the other hand, he appears quite blind to the benefits of other kinds of Neo-Kantian philosophies. Nelson's irrational attacks on prominent Neo-Kantians, like Cohen, Windelband, and Riehl, contributed to the marginalization of his philosophy.<sup>52</sup> Nelson criticized them for their acknowledgment of "prejudice of the transcendental." However, with his uncritically expressed criticism, he himself contributed to his own marginalization and was forgotten. Despite his distance from the Neo-Kantians, he belongs to this formation because membership is not a matter of the suggested solutions, but rather of the problem. The polemic between Cassirer and Nelson demonstrates this common problem and, at the same time, the differences in the proposed solutions. However, these differences are normal in the context of broadly and narrowly defined Neo-Kantianism.

It should be stated that this polemic between Nelson and the Marburg School was aimless because despite the sharp criticism of Cohen, Nelson's philosophy and many philosophical convictions were held at both Neo-Kantian schools. Such common opinions belonged, among others, to Platonism, moderate scientism or criticism of the

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1946, pp. 215—216; cf. H. Oberer: *Transzendentsphäre und konkrete Subjektivität. Ein zentrales Thema der neueren Transzendentalphilosophie*. In: *Materialien zur Neukantianismus-Diskussion*. Ed. H.-L. Ollig. Darmstadt 1987, p. 110; cf. E. von Aster: *Geschichte der Philosophie*. Aufl. 2. Stuttgart 1935, p. 370f.

<sup>49</sup> Friedrich Überwegs »Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie«. Bd. 4: *Die deutsche Philosophie des 19. Jahrhunderts und der Gegenwart*. Ed. T.K. Österreich. Aufl. 12. Berlin 1923, p. 417.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. A.J. Noras: *Historia neokantyzmu...*, p. 377—392; T. Gadacz: *Historia filozofii XX wieku: nurty. Neokantyzm, filozofia egzystencji, filozofia dialogu*. T. 2. Kraków 2009, p. 319—359.

<sup>51</sup> E. Cassirer: *Der kritische Idealismus...*, p. 22.

<sup>52</sup> A.J. Noras: *Historia neokantyzmu...*, op. cit., p. 385.



theory of judgment, as in Natorp. Together with Lask, he acknowledged the possibility of immediate knowledge. The difference concerns the concept of the critical method, which was connected with the transcendental method in the Marburg School and with the regressive method in Nelson. Despite this fundamental difference, it can be recognized that the tone of his polemics was too strong.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> E. Cassirer: *Der kritische Idealismus...*, pp. 25—26.

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