

LEONARD NELSON AND METAPHYSICAL KNOWLEDGE AGAINST THE NEO-KANTIAN BACKGROUND

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Abstract. Leonard Nelson is known primarily as a critic of epistemology in the Neo-Kantian meaning of the term. The aim of this paper is to investigate the presuppositions and consequences of his critique. I claim that what has rarely been discussed in this context is the problem of the possibility of metaphysics. By the impossibility of epistemology Nelson means the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. I intend to devote this paper to the analysis of this problem in relation to the Neo-Kantian background.

Keywords: Leonard Nelson, Neo-Kantianism, metaphysics, epistemology, knowledge.

Leonard Nelson was a popular philosopher in the first three decades of the twentieth century, whose importance faded with the eclipse of Neo-Kantianism. Recently, a significant increase in the interest in Neo-Kantianism can be noticed. This research is part of an important trend in contemporary philosophical historiography and systematic exploration of contemporary philosophy. This paper aims to shed new light on the psychological trend in the development of Neo-Kantian philosophy, especially Leonard Nelson's theoretical philosophy with regard to his attitude to the problem of possibility in the theory of knowledge (epistemology). In my opinion, despite the stereotypes and simplifications concerning the epistemological nature of Neo-Kantian philosophy, it did not lack deep metaphysical reflection that took a critical look at epistemology. This can be seen, for example, in the philosophy of a well-known representative of the psychological trend of Neo-Kantianism, Leonard Nelson. On the basis of Nelson's views, I am going to demonstrate that metaphysical considerations and the advanced criticism of epistemology appeared in Neo-Kantian philosophy long before the new ontology of Emil Lask, Martin Heidegger and Nicolai Hartmann.

Leonard Nelson's criticism of epistemology was demonstrated by Jan Woleński.¹ Woleński examined Nelson's two arguments against the possibility of epistemology, putting them into a more contemporary perspective against the background of the controversies concerning the concept of epistemology and knowledge, together with the question of epistemic justification. Using a similar approach to that of Woleński, Hans-Johann Glock² considered the problem of situating Nelson's philosophy within analytic philosophy. Nelson's problem of epistemic justification was also analyzed by Reinhard Kleinknecht and Jörg Schroth,^{3,4} who took a similar perspective. The problem of the possibility of epistemology (the theory of knowledge) was taken up by Piotr Waszczenko, Roderick M. Chisholm and Rudolf Haller.⁵ Waszczenko considered Nelson's concept of epistemology. Haller and Chisholm examined his argumentation against its possibility. They both recognized that the starting point of Nelson's criticism was the tradition of Neo-Kantian epistemology. The question of the concept of Nelson's critical method was raised by Stephan Körner⁶ who associated the problem of the possibility of epistemology with the problem of the possibility of metaphysics. In his recently published notes, at the margin of his philosophy of nature, Nelson mentioned metaphysics as the foundation of sciences and philosophy.⁷ This volume contains four notes of Nelson's lectures, intended to supplement and expand his work on the philosophy of nature. Metaphysics and the philosophy of nature was the leitmotif of Kant-Friesian thought that Leonard Nelson put into interdisciplinary research programmes at the beginning of the twentieth century. His philosophy – as a strict science – should be based on mathematical axioms. A collection recently published by Andreas Brandt and Jörg Schroth also contains Nelson's observations on metaphysics.⁸ In the Introduction to this collection, Dieter Birnbacher observes that, in contrast to Wittgenstein, who intended to destroy metaphysics as a misinterpretation of the linguistic form of expression, Nel-

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¹ Woleński (2016).

² Glock (2011).

³ Kleinknecht (2011, 1994).

⁴ Schroth (1994).

⁵ Waszczenko (1994); Chisholm (1979); Haller (1979).

⁶ Körner (1979).

⁷ Nelson (2004): 136.

⁸ Nelson (2013): 25.

son supported the claim that metaphysics was scientifically justified.⁹ The above-presented review of literature, despite several contributions to the problem of metaphysics, shows the overall dominant non-metaphysical interpretation of the philosophy of Nelson and ignores the problem of the metaphysical consequences of his anti-epistemological position. Against the background of this literature review, I would distinguish two alternative interpretations of Nelson's rejection of epistemology: either he is considered a skeptic in his rejection of the possibility of epistemological knowledge, or he is considered one who showed a different (metaphysical) way of knowing. I think that Nelson was not a skeptic, but rather a metaphysician.

Methodology is based on the universally accepted determinants of the scientific study, such as truth, accuracy, objectivity, reliance on sources, the economy of description (Ockham's razor), intersubjectivity, consistency and an ample justification of theorems. The main research method employed in this paper consists in the historical-philosophical analysis of the source materials in the original German language. That kind of content analysis consists in studying philosophical writings preserved in books, papers and other records. In this paper, the investigated materials were Nelson's texts, including his book *Über das sogenannte Erkenntnisproblem* and his papers: *Ist Metaphysikfreie Naturwissenschaft möglich?*, *Die Unmöglichkeit der Erkenntnistheorie*.¹⁰ The selection of the material, i.e., the analyzed texts, was determined by the subject matter of the research, namely Nelson's concept of metaphysical knowledge.

The main rationale behind the theory of knowledge is to philosophize according to a scientific method and explain old disputes in the strict context of science. The anti-metaphysical philosophy presumes that the metaphysical method of philosophizing is useless when compared with the epistemological reflection. In opposition to this approach, Nelson inquires whether the theory of knowledge is able to meet this objective, which is the basic intention of his lecture *Die Unmöglichkeit der Erkenntnistheorie*.¹¹ There Nelson intends not only to prove the impossibility of epistemology but also to demonstrate the positive consequences that can be drawn from this impossibility. Nelson believes that there is a third way between the philosophical science of dogmatic metaphysics and the anti-metaphysical philosophy construed as a science.

⁹ Birnbacher (2011): 10.

¹⁰ Nelson (1973, 1908, 1912), all translations mine.

¹¹ Ibidem: 592; Nelson (1973): 92–93; Glock (2011): 57; Haller (1979): 55; Waszczenko (1994): 89.

As a result, Nelson calls for a new notion of proof that is not only to “serve to trace judgments back to other judgments” but, primarily, means being “back to intuition.”¹² Accordingly, Nelson acts against the Kantian tradition that places synthetic a priori knowledge between the analytic a priori and the synthetic a posteriori.¹³ Nelson calls for a return to the original problem formulated by Hume, who was the first to notice that there are both non-analytic and non-intuitive judgments.¹⁴ When Kant and his successors clearly saw the character of these ‘metaphysical’ judgments and recognised that they could not be reduced to the known sources of knowledge, such as concept and intuition, he nonetheless tried “to (epistemologically) justify the absence of the underlying immediate knowledge by comparison with the object.”¹⁵ There is a tradition of the third way in philosophy, between empiricism and rationalism, that started with Kant and was pursued by German idealism up to Neo-Kantianism. Nelson rejects this epistemological solution as an invalid misinterpretation and shows that a true solution can only be found in psychology, understood as the science of inner experience, enabling the use of metaphysical judgments in reasoning and thus metaphysics as a science. Hence, in the background of Nelson’s argument about the impossibility of epistemology, we find the problem of the possibility of metaphysics. Nelson looks for and finds the psychological sources of metaphysical knowledge in inner experience. We cannot form metaphysical judgments directly on the basis of the sources of knowledge: concepts and intuitions. So there must be some kind of a source of metaphysical knowledge that can be found in psychology as a science of inner experience.

Epistemology as the theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*) made up the programme of the Neo-Kantian philosophy that emerged as a reaction to Hegel’s system and was an instrument against materialism.¹⁶ Epistemology in this sense was, partly thanks to Eduard Zeller, a sign of Neo-Kantianism in the post-idealist polemics, especially against Hegelianism. In this context, epistemology means preliminary investigation of the possibilities and the limits of knowledge.

¹² Nelson (1912): 605; Chisholm (1979): 39, 43.

¹³ Nelson (1912): 606; Nelson (1973): 94–99; Körner (1979): 2; Kleinknecht (1994): 27.

¹⁴ Nelson (1908): 253–257.

¹⁵ Nelson (1912): 606; Westermann (1994): 110; Schroth (1994): 129.

¹⁶ Köhnke (1981): 208–209.

The dominant Neo-Kantian theory of knowledge, represented by the Marburg and Baden Schools, was founded in opposition to the psychological tendency in epistemology. While in the School of Fries the critique of reason was still identical with rational (philosophical) psychology, in those years a current emerged, inspired by the British Empiricism, that to a greater or lesser extent identified epistemology with empirical psychology. This theory of knowledge should be called, strictly speaking, psychologism. Influenced by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Johann Gottfried von Herder and Friedrich Eduard Beneke aimed at psychological epistemology, which would characterise the foundation of all knowledge as strictly scientific psychology. A similar conception of epistemology can be found in the works of Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz, Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt and Carl Stumpf, as well as John Stuart Mill and William James. In contrast, Fries' psychologism was only ostensible (pseudo-psychologism).

The Neo-Kantian methodological objection to psychologistic epistemology suggests that psychology as an empirical science uncritically assumes the validity of objective knowledge. The validity of knowledge cannot be reduced to the psychological genesis of knowledge. According to Hermann Cohen, epistemology consists in a theory of pure thinking that is independent of any influences external to reason.¹⁷ Wilhelm Windelband understands that knowledge must be based on the highest and psychologically non-relativizable values (norms) that epistemology should reveal. Epistemology in the Neo-Kantian sense answers the question "whether, to what extent and in what sense human knowledge guarantees transcendent truth, which is presented as an indefinite presupposition of all pre-philosophical knowledge."¹⁸ The main schools of Neo-Kantianism acknowledge that epistemology cannot proceed empirically and that, in other words, what is a priori cannot be known a posteriori.

After the rejection of epistemology, Nelson turned to psychology. It is not clear what Nelson meant by his reference to psychology. This point is especially important since exactly in Nelson's time practically all important Neo-Kantians, like Herman Cohen, Paul Natorp, Ernst Cassirer, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, were anti-psychologists. Moreover, such enormously influential philosophers as Gottlob Frege and Edmund Husserl were radical anti-psychologists. It is worth investigating how Nelson's "psy-

¹⁷ Cohen (1914): 13.

¹⁸ Windelband (1912): 17, translation mine.

chologism” related to the mainstream anti-psychologism of his age and how it is possible that he is considered both a Neo-Kantian and a psychologistic thinker at the same time.

Nelson saw himself as a follower of Fries, and this philosophy was the source of his “psychologism.” The question of the understanding of psychology must, therefore, be raised at first in relation to Fries, which requires a new anthropological grounding in philosophy.¹⁹ This anthropology was later considered by his opponent, Kuno Fischer, a sign of psychologism.²⁰ In his view, philosophy after Kant faced the choice between two alternatives: either metaphysics or psychology. For Fries, the knowledge of human reason can only be self-knowledge, self-observation, psychology and anthropological criticism. Fries’ anthropological criticism was formed in opposition to the metaphysics of German Idealism presented by Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling. The answer to the question about Fries’ psychologism can be found in the way he understood logic, especially in his distinction between the demonstrative (philosophical) logic and the anthropological logic: “the first is the science of the analytic knowledge, or of the laws of the thinkability of a thing, the second is the science of nature and of the essence of our understanding.”²¹ Fries, therefore, does not reduce the whole logic to psychology and thus he is not a psychologistic thinker in the strict sense. Only if we understand psychologism generally, as any discourse about the human spirit, can Fries’ philosophy definitely qualify as a psychologistic position.

In this sense, Fries’ philosophical anthropology is nothing but the study of human cognitive faculty and corresponds to what the representatives of British Empiricism called a study of human understanding; whereas Kant called it a critique of reason.²² The subject matter of these studies is an area of the inner experience of humans, their knowledge of the inner world. Fries assumed that a psychological analysis of inner experience had to be preceded by a detection of a priori truths, and transcendental deduction was the justification for this psychological analysis. Representatives of the first Friesian School, such as Ernst Sigismund Mirbt and Ernst Friedrich Apelt, but also Beneke and Arthur Schopenhauer, held similar beliefs.

¹⁹ Fries (1807); Beiser (2014): 23–53.

²⁰ Fischer (1887): 11.

²¹ Fries (1811): 4, all translations mine.

²² Meyer (1870): 12–13.

To this one can reply that Kant did not want to give his critique an anthropological character. But we should bear in mind that, to quote Kuno Fischer, “whether the critique of reason should be metaphysical or anthropological is the genuine problem which has been unavoidable in the history of German philosophy since Kant.”²³ Is it not an error to consider that the a priori cannot be known in an a posteriori manner? This error was noticed by Jürgen Bona Meyer.²⁴ Kant talked about empirical knowledge, but he did not derive it from empirical perception, like Hume and Locke. Instead, he deduced it from the transcendental principles of the possibility of experience. Consequently, he could not connect sensibility and intellect in one reason. Therefore, his successors, such as Fichte, were skeptical about empirical psychology and internal self-observation. This fault was noticed by Fries and later by Nelson when they turned towards psychology.

In opposition to generally accepted views, Nelson is of the opinion that Fries had a basically negative attitude towards psychologism and a positive attitude towards the transcendental method: “Fries is far from being a follower of the genetic-psychological method; rather, he is its decisive opponent.”²⁵ Nelson cites a number of examples where Fries criticised the psychogenetic method. Like Fries and Bona Meyer, Nelson believes that psychologically understood deduction must be regarded as the essence of Kant's philosophy. For this reason, he thinks of metaphysical principles as closely related to psychology. The latter deals with intuition as one of two basic sources of knowledge. The primacy of intuition in contrast to reflection means that it can never be untrue as a kind of immediate knowledge.

Nelson connects Fries' objections against the transcendental prejudice with the misunderstanding of deduction; according to him, the fundamental mistake of post-Kantian dogmatism consisted in the conflation of principles: psychological and philosophical:

Transzendental nannte KANT die Untersuchung des Grundes der Möglichkeit synthetischer Urteile a priori. Der Gegenstand der transzendentalen Untersuchung [...] sind also Erkenntnisse a priori. Erkenntnisse aber erkennen wir überhaupt nur durch innere Erfahrung. Die transzendente Erkenntnis der Kritik ist also offenbar Erkenntnis aus innerer Erfahrung.

²³ Fischer (1862): 101, translation mine.

²⁴ Meyer (1870): 11–12.

²⁵ Nelson (1970b): 91, all translations mine.

[Kant called investigations into the grounds of the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments 'transcendental'. The object of the transcendental investigation [...] is thus a priori knowledge. However, we can arrive at cognitions only by inner experience. The transcendental critical knowledge is therefore obviously cognition that derives from the inner sense.]²⁶

Nelson regards transcendental criticism as an empirical science which deals, however, with the a priori knowledge. One must, therefore, distinguish exactly the subject of transcendental criticism from the content because they are not similar: The object of criticism is the philosophical knowledge as a kind of a priori knowledge, whereas its content is the transcendental knowledge that has a psychological character. The transcendental means a kind of metaphilosophical knowledge which can be known only a posteriori in inner experience, in contrast to the a priori knowledge of philosophy itself.

The psychological approach in Neo-Kantianism was represented not only by Nelson, but also by other representatives of the Neo-Kantian direction in psychology, namely Hans Cornelius and the already mentioned Fries and Bona Meyer. For example, in his *Psychologie als Erfahrungswissenschaft*, Cornelius says that psychology is "the only possible foundation of all philosophy."²⁷ Husserl directly accused Cornelius of psychologism.²⁸ The psychological approach was appreciated not only by Neo-Kantians of the psychological direction, but also, for example, by Alois Riehl, a representative of the realistic direction in Neo-Kantianism. However, Riehl rejects any psychological confusion between the logical and psychological ways of considering the concept of the a priori.²⁹ Psychologism was thus present in the broadly understood Neo-Kantianism. Nevertheless, the question of the nature of Neo-Kantian psychology is beyond the scope of this paper. We have to go back to metaphysics.

In fact, attempts were made to solve the problem of the possibility of metaphysics, *resp.* the so-called metaphysical judgments, by its reduction to the known sources of knowledge. If reflection is to be the source of knowledge of metaphysical judgments, we get metaphysical logicism, and if it is to be intuition, we arrive at metaphysical intuitionism. The Third Way between logicism and intuitionism is a rejection of the two sources of knowledge for metaphysical judgments and a rec-

²⁶ Nelson (1970a): 41, all translations mine.

²⁷ Cornelius (1897): 7, translation mine.

²⁸ Husserl (1901): 206.

²⁹ Moog (1922): 195.

ognition that metaphysical judgments have no source of knowledge, as argued by metaphysical empiricism. It is a generally accepted belief that apart from the positions of metaphysical logicism, intuitionism and empiricism, there are no other possible solutions to the problem of the possibility of metaphysics. Nelson, however, tries to prove the logical incompleteness of the distinction between intuition and reflection in order to show the possibility of a fourth solution to this problem. If we take intuition to be identical with unreflected knowledge, it must mean, of course, that non-intuitive knowledge can only come from concepts through reflection and vice versa. But Nelson notices the following linguistic usage suggesting the opposite:

Nach dem allgemeinen Sprachgebrauch versteht man unter ‚Anschauung‘ eine unmittelbar bewußte Erkenntnis. Aber nicht jede unmittelbare Erkenntnis braucht eine unmittelbar bewußte Erkenntnis zu sein. Es liegt kein Widerspruch in der Annahme, daß eine Erkenntnis, die nicht aus der Reflexion entspringt, uns nur durch Vermittlung der Reflexion zu Bewußtsein kommt. Unmittelbarkeit der Erkenntnis und Unmittelbarkeit des Bewußtseins um die Erkenntnis ist nämlich logisch zweierlei.

[Following the common language, it is understood that ‘intuition’ is an immediate conscious cognition. But not any immediate cognition needs to be an immediate conscious cognition. There is no contradiction in the assumption that knowledge that does not arise from reflection comes to our consciousness through the mediation of reflection. For the immediacy of cognition and the immediacy of consciousness to the knowledge is logically twofold.]³⁰

So Nelson argues that a distinction should be made between the immediacy of knowledge and the immediacy of consciousness. They have a different meaning and, therefore, cannot be equated. If we make this distinction, the distinction between reflection and intuition must mean that the account of the sources of knowledge is incomplete.

Nelson is well-known for his close connection with a group of mathematicians and scientists in Göttingen. This group included: David Hilbert, Felix Klein, Hermann Minkowski, Carl Runge, Max Born, Arthur Kronfeld and Otto Meyerhof.³¹ The significance of this circle comes from the fact that Nelson had a problem with his extraordinary professorship, which he received

³⁰ Nelson (1912): 608.

³¹ Noras (2012): 380.

ten years after his habilitation (postdoctoral degree), only thanks to Hilbert's support. Hilbert's geometrical axiomatics was a model for the mathematical component of Nelson's critical mathematics.³² Nelson's critical mathematics was based on Fries's writings, especially on his *Mathematische Naturphilosophie* (1822). However, Hesseberg and Nelson were particularly inspired in their work by Hilbert's *Grundlagen der Geometrie*. The influences are mutual because "Hilbert considered the regressive method important in mathematical practice, especially for justifying axioms and other general principles of science".³³ This regressive method was introduced to mathematics by Nelson. Clearly, a discussion of Nelson's metaphysical ideas in the context of their connection with science and mathematics could be important, but it definitely exceeds the scope of this paper.

In this connection, we should also mention philosophers of science, such as Karl Popper. In the context of Fries's psychologism, Popper popularized the term "Friesean Trilemma" which means that in philosophical justification we should choose between dogmatism, infinite regress and psychological foundationism. For Volker Peckhaus, it was a harbinger of Hans Albert's "Münchhausen Trilemma".³⁴ The cause of Friesean Trilemma was formulated not by Popper, but actually by Leonard Nelson in his study *Über das sogenannte Erkenntnisproblem*.³⁵ Nelson interpreted Fries as a supporter of the option which argued for the immediate self-knowledge of human reason. The liaison between Popper and Nelson was Julius Kraft, who was a friend of both philosophers. Nelson's connection with Popper's philosophy of science is certainly interesting but it requires a separate study on the "Friesean Trilemma."

Nelson was of the opinion that non-intuitive immediate cognition extended the classical distinction and thus logically justified the distinction in a new way. Following this extension, like Hume, he asked about the accuracy of various logically possible psychological theories. This question goes beyond a purely logical criticism of the classical transcendental philosophy, and is directed at the testimony of inner experience. If the sources of metaphysical judgments can be found neither in reflection nor in intuition, we have two possibilities for their rejection: either the anti-metaphysical empiricism of Hume and Mach,³⁶ or the exclusiveness

³² Peckhaus (1990): 158–159.

³³ Woleński (2016): 385.

³⁴ Peckhaus (2011): 109.

³⁵ Nelson (1973): § 152.

³⁶ Nelson (1908): 287–291.

of reflection and intuition as sources of knowledge and the assumption of the possibility of non-intuitive immediate knowledge. This first attempt at a solution failed, and Hume, a metaphysical skeptic, answered in the negative. Instead of justifying metaphysical judgments, he took on a task of providing a psychological explanation of these judgments to answer the question of the possibility of their being a product of a blind mechanism of association.³⁷ Nelson was of the opinion that Hume's judgments were reducible to the psychological principle of the anticipation of similar cases which was opposed to the laws of association.³⁸ Hume invoked Aristotle's primary association laws that explain associations during learning on the basis of space and temporal proximity (contiguity), equality and contrast between two events. This concept of association is based on the memory of learned connections and, therefore, is quite a problematic idea. In contrast, the anticipation of similar cases has an associative character and requires a kind of certainty or a minimum of probability. Hume was aware of this difficulty and, therefore, tried to present it only in terms of gradation between problematic and assertoric ideas, so that the two ideas are different only because of their different degrees of clarity. Nelson held a different opinion: Hume's empirical hypothesis of gradation between the problematic and assertoric ideas is wrong because it contradicts the facts of self-observation. Nelson noticed the problem in the judgment about the necessary connection of things:

Allerdings muß sich jede Verknüpfung von Vorstellungen durch die Gesetze der Assoziation erklären lassen. Was es hier zu erklären gilt, ist aber nicht eine Verknüpfung von Vorstellungen, sondern die Vorstellung der Verknüpfung.

[However, each connection of ideas must be explained by the laws of association. What needs to be explained here is not a connection of ideas, but the idea of connection.]³⁹

Nelson saw the association itself as relatively unproblematic and drew attention to the imaginary idea of connections between ideas. This idea of connection must arise beyond mere associations and, consequently, it requires a different type of the source of knowledge.

In his psychological critique of empiricism, Nelson went further than the empirical critique of metaphysical logicism and metaphysical mysticism, towards

³⁷ Nelson (1912): 610.

³⁸ Nelson (1908): 257–261.

³⁹ Nelson (1912): 612.

the fourth theory of criticism. The consequence of criticism is, therefore, not a rejection of metaphysical knowledge, but the adoption of non-intuitive immediate knowledge that can form the basis of metaphysics. The logical criticism of possible decisions concerning the problem of metaphysics saved Nelson from a contradictory attempt at an epistemological solution of the problem and, on the other hand, from a hasty withdrawal from a seemingly impossible logical way. If we are to admit the possibility of metaphysics, we still need a criterion for verifying the correctness of metaphysical assertions, but we cannot find it in the theory of knowledge, as it can lie neither in reflection nor in intuition. For this reason, we try to find this criterion in metaphysics itself, which must mean a defeat,

[...] da die Metaphysik den Grund der Rechtmäßigkeit ihrer Urteile offenbar ebensowenig in sich selbst enthalten kann wie irgendeine andere Wissenschaft, so mußte man diesen Grund in einer anderen, höheren Wissenschaft suchen, die aber freilich ihrerseits ihren Gehalt ebensowenig auf der bloßen Reflexion oder der Anschauung schöpfen durfte wie die Metaphysik selbst und von der es daher nicht verwunderlich ist, daß noch niemand ihrer Bearbeiter über ihre eigene Herkunft Aufschluß geben konnte.

[[...] because metaphysics obviously cannot contain the reason for the legitimacy of its propositions in itself as any other science. This is why this reason has to be found in a different, higher science, which obviously could not create its content on the mere reflection or intuition as metaphysics itself, and therefore it is not surprising that none of its authors could explain its origin.]⁴⁰

The essence of the problem is still in the confusion between knowledge and judgment, so we are unsuccessfully looking for the justification of metaphysical judgments in non-metaphysical immediate knowledge. If judgment is distinguished from immediate knowledge, the reason for the validity of metaphysical judgments should be sought not in metaphysical judgments but in the immediate ones. Nelson argues that the basis of metaphysical judgments is not in a higher science, but just in immediate metaphysical knowledge.

This immediate metaphysical knowledge, however, has a special non-intuitive and unconscious character that Nelson introduces in the following way:

Denn wenn uns auch der Grund der metaphysischen Urteile in einer unmittelbaren Erkenntnis gegeben ist, so kommt uns diese doch nicht unmittelbar

⁴⁰ Ibidem: 614.

zu Bewußtsein, derart, daß es möglich wäre, sie ohne weiteres mit den metaphysischen Urteilen zu vergleichen, um diese zu begründen.

[Because when we have been given an immediate cognition of the reason for metaphysical judgments, we draw this, yet not immediately to consciousness, so that it would be possible to compare them easily with the metaphysical judgments to justify it.]⁴¹

Direct metaphysical knowledge, fundamental for metaphysics, differs from conscious perception in the nature of its psychological phenomenon. The difference has a methodological character as we need a special non-epistemological science to justify metaphysical judgments that could show the basis of metaphysical judgments. For this basic methodological reason, Nelson concludes that science is fundamental for metaphysics:

Eben darum ist auch der empirische und psychologische Charakter dieser Wissenschaft mit der rationalen und metaphysischen Natur der durch sie zu begründenden Sätze sehr wohl verträglich. Der Grund der metaphysischen Sätze liegt ja nicht in den Sätzen dieser psychologischen Kritik, sondern in der unmittelbaren metaphysischen Erkenntnis.

[Precisely for this reason, the empirical and psychological character of this science is very well tolerated as well as the rational and metaphysical nature of their fundamental propositions. The reason for the metaphysical propositions is not in the propositions of the psychological criticism, but in immediate metaphysical knowledge.]⁴²

This science can be a kind of metaphysical psychology that comprises two opposing, rational and empirical, elements. This opposition is possible only if we go beyond the dichotomy between reflection and intuition.

Nelson explains the relationship between metaphysical propositions and their psychological criticism by an analogy with the improvability of the parallel postulate and the parallel postulate itself. The parallel postulate is known as the fifth postulate of Euclid, and its insolvability was first recognized by Carl Friedrich Gauss. On the one hand, we have a true proposition from the system of geometry and, on the other, a true proposition from its criticism, which is not a basis

⁴¹ Ibidem: 615; Kleinknecht (2011): 92.

⁴² Nelson (1912): 615–616.

of the parallel axiom itself, but has it only as its object. Nelson draws an analogy with the following example shown in the critique of metaphysical propositions:

Nehmen wir z. B. den Grundsatz der Kausalität; nennen wir ihn C. Dann beweist die psychologische Kritik den Satz D: Es existiert eine nicht-anschauliche unmittelbare Erkenntnis, die den Grund von C enthält. C ist ein Satz des Systems der Metaphysik und als solcher rationale, D ein Satz der psychologischen Kritik und als solcher empirisch. D enthält nicht den Grund von C, sondern hat ihn nur zum Gegenstand.

[We call the principle of causality, for example, a statement C. Then the psychological critique demonstrates a statement D: There is non-intuitive immediate knowledge, which contains the ground of the statement C. C is a statement of the system of metaphysics and as such it is rational, D is a statement of psychological criticism and is empirical as such. D does not contain the basis of C, but has it only as an object.]⁴³

Thus, Nelson distinguishes two kinds of relationship between propositions: a basic relationship and an object relationship, which cannot be equated. In Nelson's opinion, a basic relationship is a link between non-intuitive immediate knowledge and the principle of causality, so that the principle is justified only by this knowledge. Propositions about the basic relationship belong in a rational way to the system of metaphysics. Irrespective of that, psychological criticism uses the object relationship and determines the existence or solvability of propositions in the empirical way, so that it has this principle only as an object. If we draw a distinction between metaphysical propositions and their criticism, the critical findings concerning the impossibility of metaphysics will not deny the correctness of its principles.

As a consequence, Nelson underlines, from the standpoint of criticism, the positive and negative role of "psychology for the establishment of metaphysics." The positive role lies in the fact that psychology can detect the existence of non-intuitive immediate knowledge as the basis of metaphysical principles. We obtain principles of metaphysics from a general psychological criticism, by which we can at least exclude all those that are a priori contradictory with psychological facts.⁴⁴ This psychology can, therefore, compare metaphysical principles with facts because each metaphysics, usually uncon-

⁴³ Ibidem: 616.

⁴⁴ Ibidem: 616-617.

sciously, presumes that its sources of knowledge can be verified or falsified by comparison with psychological facts. With this possibility of logical and psychological critique of metaphysical principles, their scientific treatment becomes more accessible, which enables the “unanimous and fruitful scientific work” on common problems and by means of a common method rather than “haphazard and barren dogmatic disputes in philosophy.”

Earlier work has shown the importance of Nelson’s reflection on metaphysical knowledge for his rejection of the possibility of epistemological knowledge in the historical sense of the term. The basic interpretations, alternative between the epistemological skepticism and the critical new way, point towards different metaphysical ways of philosophical knowledge. However, these studies are rather brief and do not focus specifically on the question of the possibility of epistemology itself. In this study, we have examined Nelson’s arguments about metaphysical knowledge only on the basis of the source materials in the original German language. We have found that Nelson’s intention was not only to prove the impossibility of epistemology but also to demonstrate the positive consequences that can be drawn from this impossibility. These findings confirm that the stereotypes and simplifications concerning the epistemological nature of Neo-Kantian philosophy must be rejected. In addition, from his critical perspective, Nelson underlines the importance of psychology for the establishment of metaphysics. This study, therefore, indicates that Nelson’s critique of the possibility of epistemology has its basis in his conception of philosophical psychology and its consequences in his metaphysical position. Our results provide compelling evidence for the metaphysical consequences of Nelson’s position and suggest that this approach is important in relation to the Neo-Kantian background of his philosophy. However, some limitations should be noted, because our hypotheses have only historical support. Therefore, more work is needed to evaluate the logical consequences of Nelson’s metaphysics.

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