

**Frederick C. Beiser.** *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism: 1796-1880.* Oxford University Press 2015. 624 pp. \$99.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198722205); \$50.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780198769989).

*The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism* represents another important contribution from Beiser, whose numerous lengthy tomes have done much to illuminate our understanding of German philosophy in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This illumination is particularly welcome in the case of Neo-Kantianism, which represents a largely untrodden area of inquiry in the English-speaking world, having been the subject of only two prior book length studies: Thomas Willey's *Back to Kant* (1978) and Klaus-Christian Köhnke's *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism* (1991). Beginning at a much earlier historical moment than these works, Beiser presents a detailed account of Neo-Kantianism across its initial germinal phase (1796-1860), its 'breakthrough decade' (1860-1870), and its 'decade of consolidation' (1870-1880). He stops short of treating the decades immediately prior to the first world war, meaning that his book does not engage with the 'schools' of Neo-Kantianism that emerged during this period—the Marburg, Southwestern, and Neo-Friesian schools. According to Beiser, the principles associated with Neo-Kantianism had for the most part been worked out by 1860, prior to the emergence of these schools, and so prior to the emergence of many of the celebrated figures associated with them, such as Ernst Cassirer, Paul Natorp, and Heinrich Rickert.

One of Neo-Kantianism's core unifying features is opposition to absolute idealism. This feature became conspicuous in the 1850s and 1860s, during which time empirically oriented philosophers sought to dissociate Kant from the absolute idealists to whom he had become yoked and to place transcendental philosophy on a solidly naturalistic footing. In Part One of *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism*, Beiser suggests that a similar reaction to absolute idealism occurred at the very beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, indeed during Kant's own lifetime. Seeking to dissociate Kant from the absolute idealism of Fichte and Schelling in particular, the loosely knit trio of Fries, Herbart, and Beneke defended a view of Kant's transcendental philosophy as a 'psychological or anthropological project whose chief task was to describe human psychology and the basic workings of the human mind' (14). According to the thinkers of this initial, 'lost tradition' of Neo-Kantianism, Kant was not interested in constructing an all-embracing deductive system. Rather, by making an empirical study of the ways that human beings actually perceive and conceive the world, he sought to ascend to the most general principles of human experience and knowledge—to what he called 'synthetic a priori' principles.

This view of Kant's epistemology as a 'theory of mental activities,' and of synthetic a priori principles as the most basic governing principles of the human mind, enjoyed a lengthy heyday in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but would ultimately be rejected as psychologistic by the Neo-Kantians of the 1870s (80). The first generation of Neo-Kantians did, however, bequeath a more permanent inheritance to the movement. Again in opposition to speculative idealism, Herbart and Beneke insisted that the role of philosophy is not to illuminate the 'first principles' of the empirical sciences, but to examine the concepts and methodologies that the sciences actually employ (124, 175). This notion of philosophy's role would remain virtually axiomatic for the entire history of Neo-Kantianism.

Following characteristically detailed accounts of Fries, Herbart, and Beneke's works, Beiser takes up a pair of important episodes in mid-century philosophical and intellectual life. The first of these, the 'materialism controversy,' pitted proponents of the ascendant natural sciences against theists and others who were troubled by the reductionist tendency that they perceived in such sciences—the tendency, that is, to reduce all of reality, including thought, to matter (182-4). The

second, philosophy's mid-century 'identity crisis,' saw philosophers casting about for a way of understanding the nature and role of philosophy in light of the disintegration of speculative idealism and the increasing autonomy of the empirical sciences. If philosophy cannot credibly lay claim to ultimate metaphysical truths, and if the sciences are in any case increasingly uninterested in such metaphysical support, what role can philosophy play?

According to Beiser, Friedrich Trendelenburg should be credited with helping to formulate the Neo-Kantian response to the identity crisis. In his writings of the 1840s, Trendelenburg suggested that philosophers orient themselves toward the 'fact of the sciences,' meaning that they should abandon the pretension to 'ground' the sciences, and should instead examine its basic underlying presuppositions (191). Beiser departs from previous historians, however, in cautioning against an overly strong identification of Trendelenburg with Neo-Kantianism (196). While Trendelenburg did recommend that philosophy reorient itself around scientific knowledge, he continued to believe that epistemological problems could only be fully resolved on the basis of an idealist metaphysics (195). Along with Hermann Lotze, Trendelenburg is in effect the last of the absolute idealists, according to Beiser.

A more authentically Neo-Kantian figure was the scientist-philosopher Hermann von Helmholtz. Like Trendelenburg, Helmholtz sought to respond to philosophy's identity crisis by establishing a closer relationship between philosophy and the newly-emboldened sciences. Rather than merely observing the sciences from a distance, however, Helmholtz suggested that philosophy could make direct use of recent psychological and physiological research to vindicate Kantian epistemology (198). Thus, Helmholtz seized upon Johannes Müller's discovery that the sensory organs play a role in shaping the content of perception as confirmation of Kant's view that our representations are shaped by the mind (199). Unfortunately, in attempting to derive epistemological conclusions from natural science, Helmholtz committed what is effectively a logical error, according to Beiser. The role of an authentically transcendental epistemology is to investigate the presuppositions of empirical science. If we identify epistemology with a particular empirical science, as Helmholtz does, then it cannot coherently perform this role (203, 205).

Helmholtz's way of conceiving epistemology was extremely influential during the crucial decade of the 1860s. As Beiser explains in Part Two of *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism*, all of the main Neo-Kantian figures during this period—Kuno Fischer, Eduard Zeller, Otto Liebmann, Jurgen Bona Meyer, and Friedrich Albert Lange—endorsed the view that knowledge is an essentially mental activity, meaning that epistemology should be pursued using the instruments of psychology (209, 341, 382, 397). To the extent that these figures also sought to establish philosophy's autonomy relative to the sciences, however, they courted the same contradiction as Helmholtz. Philosophy cannot be both a second-order inquiry into first-order empirical knowledge *and* a form of empirical knowledge in its own right. As for why the Neo-Kantians of the 1860s fail to notice this contradiction, it is because the status of psychology was not entirely clear at mid-century, according to Beiser. As the century progressed, and it became apparent that psychology is essentially an empirical science, it also became apparent that psychology could not be expected to account for the possibility of empirical knowledge in general (210).

Kant's notorious *ding an sich* had a similarly ambiguous standing during this period. On the one hand, the generation of the 1860s rejected the strongly realist understanding of this notion, according to which the *ding an sich* signifies reality as it exists in itself, independently of synthetic consciousness. On the other hand, their position was not obviously incompatible with this way of thinking about the *ding an sich*. If, following Helmholtz, knowledge is to be explained in terms of the subjective formation of the 'given content of experience,' then we can evidently inquire into the given as it exists *in itself*, prior to subjective formation (211).

Part Three of *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism* begins with Hermann Cohen, the founder of the Marburg School. According to Beiser, Cohen's first major contribution, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (1871), can be understood in light of the theoretical tensions that afflicted the Neo-Kantianism of the 1860s. In the first place, Cohen attempted to disentangle Kant's epistemology from empirical psychology. Where Neo-Kantians from Fries to Lange maintained that Kantian epistemology was a matter of illuminating the psychological and physiological processes underlying experience, Cohen argued that Kant was focused, instead, on spelling out the formal conditions of exact natural scientific knowledge. By extension, where earlier generations of Neo-Kantianism understood apriority in terms of psychological indispensability, Cohen argued that apriority should be understood in terms of the necessary conditions of exact scientific knowledge. (The principle 'every event has a cause,' therefore, is not a priori in the sense that it makes lived experience possible; it is a priori in the sense that it is a presupposition of Newtonian physics). Second, Cohen closed off any theoretical opening for the *ding an sich* in the sense of a real, inaccessible something. He did so by denying what the psychological rendering of Kant presupposes: namely, that we can distinguish within experience between a 'given' sensory content and the a priori forms that are applied *to* that content. For Cohen, there is no place within experience for the pure, pre-categorical given, hence nothing behind which a thing in itself could be concealed. The latter is simply a regulatory idea. As we seek to gain knowledge of the object, we necessarily orient ourselves toward the idea of the object as it exists in itself.

*The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism* concludes with a discussion of the two other major Neo-Kantian philosophers of the 1870s, Wilhelm Windelband and Alois Riehl. Windelband, the founder of the Southwest School of Neo-Kantianism, is significant for having broadened the mandate of transcendental philosophy to include history, proposing to clarify the conceptual and methodological conditions of possibility for knowledge of particular events. He is also significant for having reconceived philosophy as an essentially normative enterprise (494). Philosophy's role, he held, is not to determine the real psychological laws of perception or conception. Rather, it is to determine the principles that *should be* acknowledged if the cognitive goals of truth, beauty, or goodness are to be realized (338-39). Riehl, meanwhile, is significant for having defended the real existence of the *ding an sich*. Seeking to align transcendental philosophy more closely with natural science, which assumes the existence of a real, mind-independent object of knowledge, he sought to show that the *ding an sich* is 'the very foundation of Kant's philosophy' (533). Both authors, Windelband and Riehl, are nowadays very little studied. It is one of the many merits of Beiser's exhaustive history of Neo-Kantianism to have shone a light on these, and many other, important figures in the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century European philosophy.

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