

Metaphysics, Knowledge, and Faith in Russian Neo-Kantianism*

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Analyzing philosophy in Russia in the late 19th and the early 20th century is a rather complicated task due to at least two reasons: firstly, this epoch referred to as the spiritual renaissance or the Silver Age in our domestic literature is extremely fruitful – it generates a great number of schools, trends, circles, and societies of very different philosophical orientations, philosophical magazines are published, and even daily newspapers actively cooperate with philosophers, which confirms the fact that large communities of the Russian intelligentsia are fascinated by philosophy¹. Such diversity and variety of philosophical life makes problem analysis a complicated issue, since it involves a certain restriction in both content-related and factual aspects, concentrating materials close to the topic of discussion for its more detailed study. This analysis is also obfuscated by another reason, namely, the forced interruption of the process of philosophical development in Russia caused by the October Revolution and persecution of representatives of non-Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

Nevertheless, referring to numerous evidence, we can still highlight the three most significant trends in Russian philosophy of the early 20th century which have the most serious impact on the intellectual life of the country and concentrate an overwhelming majority of original thinkers: Marxist positivism², Neo-Kantianism, and religious philosophy. For the development of these areas, favorable conditions were created at that time; among others, the most important one was the predominance of Marxism, positivism, and Neo-Kantianism in European philosophy. The reason for their domination is a separate topic that would lead us away from the issue to be discussed; the nature of the refraction of the fundamental ideas of the above-mentioned Western philosophical trends against the Russian

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¹ For further details, see the monograph by S. A. Nizhnikov titled *Works by Immanuel Kant in the Dialogue of Cultures of Russia and the West* (Moscow, ROSSPEN, 2015, pp. 18-25).

² The fact that, according to an opinion poll for secondary educational institution students conducted in Russia in 1903, A. Bogdanov known as a Bolshevik and an ideologist of socialism was the most popular author of works dedicated to social studies is of particular interest. See: Prilepko E.M.: Bogdanov. In: *Updated Philosophical Dictionary*. Mn.: Knizhny Dom, 2001, p. 113.

background is more relevant in this case.

Regardless of all the contradictory confrontation and incompatibility of these three trends, one can point out the figure that unites them all: oddly enough, this is Kant. Although very few people have considered it, it was Kantian critical philosophy that somehow served as the source of these philosophical mentalities opposing each other. This fact is an evidence of the real universality of the ideas of the German genius, the enduring value and relevance of his philosophy. They were also demanded by those who sought a closer connection of scientific cognition with everyday existence, a volatile, fluid life, those who believed in discovering the ways of transforming social reality by means of philosophy, those who regarded philosophy as a model of pure knowledge, and, finally, those who defined philosophy as an instrument for interpreting divine symbols.

At first glance, the role of Kantian philosophy in the evolution of Russian Marxist writers towards idealism and, ultimately, towards a religious worldview is the most surprising one. The path from Marxism to idealism and the way from the latter to religious philosophy turned out to be extremely straightforward and obvious for Russian thinkers. The most significant milestones on this path were the collections titled *Problems of Idealism* (1902) and *From Marxism to Idealism* (1903) by S. Bulgakov. In these collections, mostly former Marxists opposed Marxism and positivism, believing that philosophical idealism was the necessary basis for overcoming their scientific, materialistic, and utilitarian unilateralism. It should be mentioned, of course, that they assimilated Marxism in a non-dogmatic manner. They revised it primarily from a moral standpoint, trying to synthesize the social orientation of Marxism with the ethical fundamentals of Kantianism and Neo-Kantianism. Fr. Georges Florovsky formulated it in a more cardinal manner, "There was a question of freedom and necessity of the public process, which inevitably led to metaphysics... One can say it was exactly Marxism that influenced the turn of our religious search towards Orthodoxy (a remark by G. Fedotov)"³.

German Neo-Kantianism in its logical and methodological (the Marburg school) and the value-based and culturological (the Baden school) versions in the early 20th century experiences a stage of theoretical flowering and acquires Pan-European fame and authority. It finds its supporters in Russia, influencing literature, theological thought, and, above all, philosophy. A specific Russian Neo-Kantian trend in philosophy with its particular mindset, objectives, program, and its own printed publication, *Logos* magazine (published in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1910-1914) emerges. F. A. Stepun later described the ac-

³ Florovsky G. V.: *Ways of Russian Theology*. Vilnius: Vilnius Orthodox Diocese Department, 1991, pp. 453-454.

tivities of *Logos* in the following words, "... we were determined to cut Moscow Neo-Slavophiles' hair and nails. I would not claim we were wrong in every aspect, but we started reforming the style of Russian philosophy in a very self-confident manner"⁴. For many philosophers and writers, the Neo-Kantian temptation turned out to be a transient and didactic infatuation, an "age-related" stage in the development of their worldview. It is noteworthy that even those philosophers who had not broken with the Kantian principles tried to reconcile "critical" philosophy with the traditions of Russian contemplation and faith. V. V. Zenkovsky remarks that Russian Neo-Kantianism, in spite of all its loyalty to the requirements of "criticism", nevertheless "does not break with the fundamental problems of the Russian spirit"⁵.

Russian Neo-Kantians insisted on the self-sufficiency of the fundamental ideas of the great German philosopher, the erroneous nature of strengthening them by "cross-breeding" them with the ideas of other philosophical schools, and sought for a more precise explication, which, in their opinion, the founder of transcendental philosophy himself had failed to achieve. All the utilitarian approaches to Kantian teaching demonstrate misunderstanding, forgetting the "Copernican revolution" which defined the object and the purpose of philosophy. Mentioning the basic merits of the German thinker, B. V. Yakovenko, the creative follower of Kant in Russia, emphasizes that

Kant was the *first* (italics used by Yakovenko) to ask the question of the nature of the world, the essence of things, *gnoseologically*; he was the first to anticipate solving it by an essentially philosophical study of cognition; he was the first to take philosophical analysis through the crucible of preliminary cognitive criticism⁶.

The opinion of a number of Russian philosophers and historians of philosophy who notice an appeal to epistemological issues at the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries as one of the most important indicators of a high level of philosophizing reached by the philosophical thought in Russia at that time quite naturally follows from this situation.

The active inclusion of religious issues in the philosophical context generated such a phenomenon as the "religious and philosophical Renaissance in Russia" (the term used by Berdyaev and Levitsky). The publication of the collection titled *Vekhi* (*Milestones*) in March 1909 was a peculiar culmination of this renaissance. The authors of the collection sharply criticized the radical wing of the Russian

⁴ Stepan F.: *Vergangenes und Unvergängliches*. New York, 1956. V.1, pp. 281-282.

⁵ Zenkovsky V. V.: *A History of Russian Philosophy*: In 2 volumes. L., 1991. V.II. Pt. 1, p. 225.

⁶ Yakovenko B. V.: *Philosophical Economism*; Yakovenko B. V.: *Power of Philosophy*. SPb.: Nauka, 2000, p. 676.

intelligentsia. They argued that the cause of its delusions was its separation from the spiritual fundamentals. The Russian revolutionary intelligentsia was accused of social utopianism and ethical nihilism. On the contrary, the authors of *Vekhi* sought to put forward the idea of the religious culture based on knowledge and augmentation of the best domestic traditions.

In this situation, it seems quite natural to consider the issue of the correlation between faith and knowledge as one of the central points in the gnoseological sphere. In the directions of Russian philosophy of the early 20th century designated as the leading ones, this issue had completely different orientation due to the cardinal differences in philosophical positions. Whereas in Russian empirio-criticism and Neo-Kantianism, faith, as a basic characteristic of a religious worldview was opposed to philosophical knowledge, was removed from the limits of philosophical research and served to denote negative features of knowledge and cognition which had to be revealed and overcome, in Russian religious philosophy, faith was the essential instrument of human cognition and the element of knowledge that creates its true meaning and significance⁷.

B. P. Vysheslavtsev notes that

The essential issues of world philosophy are, of course, the issues of Russian philosophy, too. Yet there is a Russian approach to world philosophical issues, a Russian way of experiencing and discussing them. Different nations notice and appreciate various thoughts and feelings in that richness of content that is presented by every great philosopher. Within this framework, we have a Russian Plato, a Russian Plotinus, a Russian Descartes, a Russian Pascal and, of course, a Russian Kant. Nationalism in philosophy is as impossible as in science; but a predominant interest in various world problems and different traditions of thought among different nations is possible⁸.

Proceeding from scientific cognition as the basic instrument of human existence, empirio-criticism and Neo-Kantianism choose different ways. According to Russian Neo-Kantians, empirio-criticism follows science, believing in it, criticism suggests understanding where science acquires the conditions that make it necessary and productive in the life of the human community instead of merely believing. Such a “Copernican Revolution” by Kant fulfilled a twofold task: leaving the indirect dependence of philosophy on science in the sphere of theoretical knowledge and on religion in the sphere of practical action, it therefore liberated philosophy from the direct influence of faith as its constituent structure; that was

⁷ Nizhnikov S. A.: *Metaphysics of Faith in Russian Philosophy*. Moscow: INFRA-M, 2012.

⁸ Vysheslavtsev B. P.: *The Eternal in Russian Philosophy*; Vysheslavtsev B.P.: *The Ethics of Transformed Eros*. M.: Respublika, 1994, p. 154.

how it determined the true place of philosophy in the system of human thought. Russian Neo-Kantians are confident that only an immature pre-Kantian or an errant post-Kantian philosophy does not admit the independence and self-sufficiency of philosophical knowledge, and fails to find a specifically philosophical subject area, resorting to the assistance of the spheres which are seemingly more deeply rooted in human existence, believing in their serious importance for the essence of philosophical cognition.

Admitting the particular relevance of the problem of the relationship between faith and knowledge, the patriarch of Russian Neo-Kantians *Alexander Ivanovich Vvedensky* (1856-1925) in his polemical article *On the Types of Faith in Its Relationship to Knowledge* (1896), suggests discussing it within the framework of critical philosophy. We should immediately note, however, its ethical and psychological focus taken by the analysis of this problem within Vvedensky's concept. Asking himself what faith is, the Russian Neo-Kantian provides the following answer, "... we can characterize faith as a state that excludes doubt in a different way than knowledge does"⁹. Still, separating faith and knowledge, considering both materialistic and idealistic dogmatism incompatible with the process of cognition, A. Vvedensky does not build an impenetrable wall between them. In his opinion, there should be something in the middle that is not a blind and naive faith and moves towards discursive rational knowledge; it is an intuitive knowledge¹⁰ or conscious faith, a belief allowed by critical reason. Such a faith which "relies, on the one hand, on the demands of a moral sense, and on the other hand, on an intuitively obtained knowledge of the boundaries of verifiable cognition"¹¹, according to the Russian Neo-Kantian, is not cognized, but is felt.

Sergei Iosifovich Hessen (1887 - 1950), A. Vvedensky's younger Neo-Kantian colleague, demonstrates a more critical attitude towards this sort of conscious faith which can only be intuitively felt, but not rationally comprehended. In *Fundamentals of Pedagogy* (1923), he writes that "the power of individuality is rooted not in its own self, not in the natural power of its psychophysical organism, but in those spiritual values that permeate the body and soul..." In addition to the physical and the mental, he also recognizes the "third kingdom" – that of "values and the meaning", though he understands it in the Neo-Kantian way: not as a transcendent, but as a transcendental one. As Zenkovsky notes, Hessen is "constantly on the threshold of metaphysics – but only on the threshold"¹². In philosophical anthropology and ped-

⁹ Vvedensky A. I. *On the Types of Faith in Its Relationship to Knowledge*; Vvedensky A. I. *Articles on Philosophy*. SPb.: Saint Petersburg University Publishing House, 1996, p. 186.

¹⁰ Vvedensky also refers to the so-called unconscious and regrets the fact that there is no theory of intuitive knowledge yet.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 188.

¹² Zenkovsky V. V.: *History of Russian Philosophy*. 2 Volumes. Leningrad, EGO, 1991. Volume II.

agogical theory (“applied philosophy”), Hessen is faithful to the basic principles of “critical” philosophy, including when he insists that “personality is acquired only by working on super-personal tasks”¹³.

According to Hessen, faith, which is part of the structure of philosophical knowledge, fundamentally changes its nature. Rational knowledge becomes not intuitive, but dogmatic, and in case of reliance on science, it acquires the features of metaphysics; in case of reliance on religion, it acquires the features of mysticism. However, by and large, according to S. Hessen, there is no fundamental difference between metaphysics and mysticism, since they reveal a genuine sphere of philosophy that is not subject to any particular sciences: the sphere of formal premises of empirical truth, realized justice, and created beauty. His article in *Logos* magazine, where he was one of the co-editors, published in 1910, is dedicated to the analysis of the essential unity of the phenomena of mysticism and metaphysics. Having defined that “firstly, any metaphysics is a confusion of boundaries either between separate sciences or between separate areas of culture and, secondly, any metaphysics is a realism of concepts, because it hypostases the products of a particular science into true existence”¹⁴, the Russian follower of H. Rickert claims that “any mysticism arises quite analogically where the boundaries between philosophy and life are not respected, between the sphere of cultural creativity or, otherwise, cultural values and the sphere of irrational experience not imprinted in any cultural values”. Therefore, Hessen draws a preliminary conclusion: “mysticism is a kind of metaphysics that arises where the broken borders are the last boundaries that separate the sphere of philosophy and culture from the sphere of irrational experience and mysticism”¹⁵.

Unlike A. Vvedensky, S. Hessen believes that the boundaries of our knowledge can be found only on the one side – that of critical philosophy. Border poles on the demarcation line dividing the rational and the irrational, philosophy and mysticism, are the concepts that do not expand our knowledge and are designated by Kant as ideas. Mystical ideas striving to expand our knowledge and therefore breaching its real boundaries, according to S. Hessen, are not cognized; instead, they are experienced. He regards such experience devoid of any positive content as an experience opposing philosophical knowledge and absolutely denying it.

The irrational considered methodologically, not contentively, in the opinion of another Russian Neo-Kantian, the follower of H. Cohen and P. Natorp, *Vasily*

Part 1, p. 250.

¹³ Hessen S. I.: *Fundamentals of Pedagogy. Introduction to Applied Philosophy*. M.: Shkola-Press, 1995, p. 73.

¹⁴ Hessen S. I.: *Mysticism and Metaphysics*. In: Hessen S. I.: *Selected Works*. M.: Russian Political Encyclopedia (ROSPEP), 1998, p. 41.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

Emilyevich Sezeman (1884-1963), has quite a positive meaning for transcendental philosophy, allowing him to "... expand the area of the Neo-Kantian problematics"¹⁶. Recognizing the infinity (the "*feri*" by Natorp) and the problematic nature of scientific cognition, the rational inexhaustibility of the concrete premise, following his Marburg teachers, Sezeman finds in such negative (μὴόν) some positive traits that turn irrationality into rationality of higher order, rationality as a system. Methodological use of irrationality, according to him, significantly changes the characteristics of knowledge itself: it is deprived of the possibility of asserting any kind of dogmatic elements – neither the empirical premise nor a priori forms could be withdrawn from philosophical inquiry. The dual rational and irrational essence of objective scientific cognition finds its confirmation in the dual structure of consciousness "composed of two dissimilar factors: one of them is formal and rational, and another one is material and irrational"¹⁷. This is how, according to V. Sezeman, one can substantiate the "gnoseological doctrine according to which scientific knowledge originates from two different sources: from an irrational premise (in traditional terminology: from experience) and from pure rationality (i.e. from thinking). In the objective composition of knowledge, this dualism of sources corresponds to its dual rational and irrational (problematic) nature"¹⁸.

Hence, Russian Neo-Kantianism confirmed the contentive emptiness of faith, but discovered its methodological productivity: as a problematic area depriving the cognitive process of dogmatic moments and as an idea of a system that brings the objective and integrity to the cognitive process, faith becomes an essential component of human knowledge.

Abstract

Metaphysics, Knowledge, and Faith in Russian Neo-Kantianism

The article consistently examines the issues of the influence of Kantian philosophy on the development of philosophical schools and trends in Russia, the interrelations between Russian culture and the so-called "Silver Age" with the preferences related to religious problematics in the studies by Russian thinkers, and the special relevance of the problem of the correlation between faith and knowledge for the representatives of Russian Neo-Kantianism.

¹⁶ Belov V. N.: *V. E. Sezeman is a systematic of Russian Neo-Kantianism* In: [Voprosy Filosofii] *Issues of Philosophy*. 2012. No 4, p. 124.

¹⁷ Sezeman V. E.: *The Rational and the Irrational in the Philosophical System*. In: *Logos*. 1911. Book One. Musaget Publishing House, p. 111.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Based on the analysis of the works by the leading representatives of Russian Neo-Kantianism such as A. Vvedensky, S. Hessen, and V. Sezeman, the article reveals that Russian Neo-Kantianism demonstrates the methodological productivity of faith, though denying its meaningful completeness. It remarks the evolution of Russian Neo-Kantians from frequently denying metaphysics to accepting it as a “regulatory” principle.

Keywords: gnoseology, knowledge, faith, Russian Neo-Kantianism, metaphysics

Abstrakt

Metaphysik, Wissen und Glauben im russischen Neukantianismus

Der Artikel untersucht konsequent die Fragen des Einflusses der Kantischen Philosophie auf die Entwicklung philosophischer Schulen und Tendenzen in Russland, die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen der russischen Kultur und der sogenannten “Silver Age” mit den Präferenzen religiöser Problematik in den Studien von Russische Denker, und die besondere Bedeutung der Beziehung zwischen Glauben und Wissen für die Vertreter des russischen Neukantianismus.

Ausgehend von der Analyse von Werken der führenden Vertreter des russischen Neukantianismus wie A. Vvedensky, S. Hessen und V. Sezeman zeigt der Artikel, dass der russische Neukantianismus die methodische Produktivität des Glaubens demonstriert, obwohl er seine signifikante Vollständigkeit leugnet. In dem Artikel wird die Entwicklung der russischen Neukantianer von der oft verneinenden Metaphysik bis zur Annahme als “normative” Prinzip festgehalten.

Schlüsselwörter: Gnoseologie, Wissen, Glaube, russischer Neukantianismus, Metaphysik

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