

Jacinto Páez Bonifaci
**Wilhelm Windelband's Historical
Philosophy. The Path from Neo-Kantianism
to Neo-Hegelianism**

Georg Olms Verlag, Baden-Baden 2023
pp. 250, € 59.00, ISBN 9783487166544

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Jacinto Páez Bonifaci's recent volume, *Wilhelm Windelband's Historical Philosophy: The Path from Neo-Kantianism to Neo-Hegelianism*, contributes to the growing scholarly interest in the study of Neo-Kantianism, which has gained particular momentum over the past two decades.

The central focus of the volume is the notion of "historical philosophy", which emerges as an attempt to synthesize two seemingly opposing dimensions: philosophy's systematic nature and the historical framework through which it is realized. According to the author, this is a fundamental issue in contemporary philosophical debate: the enduring relevance of this question necessitates a return to the origins of this problematic relationship (p. 18).

The text is structured into three sections. The first part introduces Windelband's thought, elucidating the historical and theoretical foundations required for understanding its premises.

The first chapter examines the definition of "historical philosophy", a key concept for understanding Windelband's approach to the history of philosophy. This chapter lays the groundwork for the central thesis that will be developed throughout the volume: that Windelband's engagement with history is neither aimed at formulating a mere logic of history nor reducible to a form of historicism. According to the author, the fundamental element of "historical philosophy" lies in the acknowledgment that philosophy is inherently tied to its history. This constitutive relationship inaugurates a specific philosophical model. The author employs "historical philosophy" as a form of "philosophy of philosophy" as a mode of philosophical self-reflection on its historical constitution. Its fundamental inquiry concerns the conditions of its

possibility, i.e. how philosophy is constituted within the historical dimension (pp. 31-32). This chapter includes an account of the historiographical positions that set the coordinates of Windelband's approach to the history of philosophy, as "historical philosophy" was only possible in the XIX century because of the increased attention to the historical dimension, which becomes not further neglectable.

The second chapter addresses what is arguably the principal historiographical dilemma concerning Neo-Kantianism: the question of its origins, chronological, geographical, and thematic composition, and key figures. This reconstruction aims to situate Windelband within the philosophical period to which he belongs and to trace the genealogy of the intellectual landscape from which his theoretical concerns emerged. Alongside this historiographical analysis, the author engages with several figures who played a crucial role in the revival of Kantian thought and exerted a tangible influence on Windelband. In particular, Páez Bonifaci focuses on the intellectual triangulation between Zeller, Fischer, and Lotze.

The second part focuses on Windelband's philosophical program.

In the third chapter, Páez Bonifaci takes a stance on the most problematic issue concerning Windelband's thought: the fragmented nature of his system and the very question of whether a system is to be found in Windelband. Without disregarding the unfinished character of Windelband's system, the author argues that it is possible to identify key thematic threads running through his works, particularly in the *Präludien* (1st ed. 1884). The primary objective is to determine the overarching purpose of Windelband's philosophical system (p. 78). Páez Bonifaci proposes a reading strategy that moves beyond viewing Windelband's essays as autonomous works, instead interpreting them as a "presentation of a single philosophical project" (p. 84). These essays are united by a singular conception of philosophy, through which Windelband articulates his appropriation of Kantian critique. Philosophy is to be understood as the critical science of universally valid judgments – i.e. a "reflection on the possibility of the grounding" (p. 96) of judgments that claim universal and necessary validity. These judgments are divided into three categories, forming a theoretical framework for logic, ethics, and aesthetics, reproducing the tripartite structure of Kantian critique. Páez Bonifaci argues that the fundamental divergence between Kant and the Neo-Kantians lies

in the latter's diminished focus on a system of faculties, shifting toward conceptualizing reason as a system of norms. This shift leads to a significant conclusion: if philosophy is the science of normative consciousness, then it constitutes an ideal in the Kantian sense, as normative consciousness ultimately eludes complete comprehension – rendering philosophy an infinite task. In this sense, the history of philosophy is characterized as “the constant struggle to concretize and evaluate the realization of the normative consciousness in the human world” (p. 112).

Chapter 4 forms the core of the text. It explores the conditions under which a connection between transcendental philosophy and history becomes possible, a relationship that enables history to be regarded not merely as an object of epistemological interest but as bearing intrinsic philosophical significance. According to the author, these conditions are to be found in Windelband's doctrine of method. Windelband's critical method is teleological: philosophy concerns itself with values, which, however, cannot be acquired through induction, as empirical data, or deduced from metaphysical propositions. The validity of axioms is what philosophical methodology must seek to examine by comparing the axiom to an end presupposed as an ideal for our thinking, willing, and feeling (p. 125). The key point is that for this method to function, inquiry must be grounded in some given material: it is only through history that one gains access to the content of norms, which unfold and are recognized historically alongside the progressive temporal development of human reason. Windelband's thought introduces an anti-rationalist turn within critical idealism: philosophy is understood as reason's self-reflection on its principles and activity – yet this self-reflection is always conceptualized within a historical dimension. The connection between concept and experience is thus constitutive of critical philosophy, and it is because of this necessary link that philosophy requires an *organon*. In such a recognition of history's relevance to critical philosophy, the author identifies Windelband's originality within the Neo-Kantian tradition.

Chapter 5 engages with an analysis of Windelband's conception of history. The author argues that the problem of historical consciousness and history in general cannot (nor should) be definitively resolved through methodological discussions, even though such discussions are required. This is because the historical dimension is not primarily grounded in the theory of knowledge

but is fundamentally practical. History is revealed as a process intrinsically linked to human freedom and the realization of values, thereby situating history within a practical rather than merely theoretical framework (p. 162). Within the process of historical constitution, a fundamental role is played by consciousness, which moves teleologically toward the realization of values. Thus, the historical constitution represents an act of synthesis (p. 166). History assumes a dual significance: it initiates the process of reflection while simultaneously serving as the destination of philosophy, whose ultimate goal is the historical embodiment of value (p. 169).

Chapter 6 directly addresses the issue of the philosophy of the history of philosophy. The author revisits a fundamental essay dedicated to the *Geschichte der Philosophie* (1905). In this work, Windelband extends the definition of philosophy presented in the *Präludien* by recognizing the historical nature of philosophy's object. This recognition necessitates the inclusion of the history of philosophy within the philosophical system *tout court*. Páez Bonifaci highlights the continuity between Windelband's 1905 theses and the essays in the *Präludien*, where similar concerns were at stake, particularly the relationship between empirical consciousness and normative consciousness, as well as reason and its system of values, which can be accessed only through the historical process of human rational activity (p. 186). Moreover, in the 1905 text, Windelband revisits methodological issues, reaffirming the distinction between genesis and critique in terms of discovery and justification (p. 190). The principles of reason cannot find their foundation in empirical experience; it is within the historical dimension that reason, through human thought, advances toward self-knowledge. Thus, there is a progression from history as *Stoff*, material and object of philosophy, to universally valid values (p. 192). In this sense, philosophy remains an unattainable ideal.

The third part, which fully corresponds to Chapter 7, examines Windelband's philosophy of culture, focusing on how his thought reconciled the transcendental perspective with a historically self-reflective dimension, establishing a connection with Hegel without abandoning its Kantian foundations. This chapter explores the relationship between Windelband and Hegelianism, tracing the evolution of his thought toward a form of "neo-Hegelianism", as suggested in his *Die Erneuerung des Hegelianismus* (p. 110). The author analyzes how Windelband's definition of philosophy as the science of normative consciousness relates to his

philosophy of culture and the “historical philosophy” category. He argues that while Windelband remains within a Kantian framework, he also integrates aspects of Hegel’s historical and dynamic philosophy. This shift from a focus on the theory of knowledge to a theory of history enables the inclusion of Hegelian historical and dialectical considerations, without abandoning Kant’s critical framework. The philosophy of culture emerges as the most appropriate expression of transcendental idealism.

For several reasons, Páez Bonifaci’s volume undoubtedly constitutes a fundamental work for the study of Windelband’s thought. One of its key strengths lies in the author’s ability to systematically address Windelband’s philosophy, which, despite its fragmentary nature, reveals its coherence: even in the incompleteness of the system, the author identifies its main threads, which represents a crucial contribution to understanding the entire Neo-Kantian movement and to rediscovering the German philosopher’s proposal.

Secondly, revisiting Windelband’s theses on the status of history and its relationship with philosophy means taking this component seriously and identifying the historical dimension as one of the foundational axes of the system. It represents the first step toward avoiding the trap of associating Windelband with historicism, a stance he explicitly rejects. The development of the notion of “historical philosophy”, along with the investigation of its theoretical premises and practical applications, enables the author to introduce a philosophical category that offers an alternative relationship with history compared to historicism.

Furthermore, the exploration of the relationship between the system and history, and the focus on the status of the history of philosophy within Windelband’s thought, are not pursued by the author merely for historiographical reconstruction. On the contrary, these elements are relevant to contemporary debates, as they provide a model for reflecting on the philosophy of the history of philosophy.

Finally, the author successfully conveys a significant aspect of Neo-Kantianism as a whole. Precisely because the focus is on the relationship between philosophy and its history, Páez Bonifaci highlights that what characterizes this movement is not a simple reassertion of Kantian theses, but rather the commitment to developing a philosophical system that, starting from Kant, continues in original forms.