Wilhelm Windelband and the problem of relativism

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Abstract

This paper analyses the shifts in Wilhelm Windelband's 'critical philosophy of values' as it developed hand in hand with his understanding of relativism. The paper has two goals. On the one hand, by analysing the role that relativism played in his philosophical project, it seeks to contribute to a better understanding of Windelband's intellectual development in the context of historicism and Neo-Kantianism. On the other hand, by highlighting Windelband's contribution to the understanding of relativism, it sheds light on an important episode in the history of that problem. The paper distinguishes between three phases in Windelband's thinking and shows that his views about relativism changed in close connection with his conception of history. The early Windelband thought that historicism was compatible with absolute validity because he was firmly convinced of historical progress. The mature Windelband rejected progress as a means for justifying validity and put the problem of relativism into sharp relief. In response to the failure of his mature philosophy to fend off relativism, the later Windelband strengthened the role of history again. The paper concludes that Windelband's significance lies not in his arguments against relativism, but rather in having furthered philosophical understanding of the problems at stake.

Keywords

Wilhelm Windelband; Relativism; Historicism; Psychologism; Neo-Kantianism

1. Introduction

In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Imperial Germany, relativism was a recurring topic of debate. Philosophers used the term primarily in a polemical manner. 'Relativism' indicated a philosophical malaise, an evil to be avoided. It threatened to collapse the distinction between the factual and the normative and to undermine values. Some even feared that relativism would destroy the possibility of philosophy altogether, or that it would plant the seeds of atheism and political anarchy. With the exception of Georg Simmel, who defended a relativist view of justification in his *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900)[1], most philosophers either

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[1] For a concise discussion of Simmel's epistemic relativism see Steizinger 2015.

rejected relativism, or at least struggled to avoid it. Authors from different theoretical backgrounds presented their projects as solutions to the problem, among them Wilhelm Windelband (1924 [1882b], 1924 [1883a]), Wilhelm Dilthey (1960 [1898], 1974 [1907]), Edmund Husserl (1900), Max Wentscher (1902), Heinrich Rickert (1924 [1904]), Emil Lask (1907 [1905]), Friedrich Gundolf (1911), and Ernst Troeltsch (1922).

In this list, Windelband stands out regarding both timing and philosophical rigour. Writing about relativism as early as 1882, he was one of the first philosophers to treat relativism as a distinct philosophical problem. He was also among the very few who provided explicit arguments about how relativism emerges and what makes it dangerous to philosophy. While Windelband is well recognized for having championed the historiography of philosophy as a 'history of problems', for his distinction between 'nomothetic' and 'idiographic' sciences, and for having founded the Southwest school of Neo-Kantianism, his contribution to understanding the problem of relativism is not equally appreciated.

In this paper, I analyse Windelband's philosophical engagement with relativism. The paper has two goals. One the one hand, by analysing the role that reflections on relativism played in his broader philosophical project, I seek to contribute to existing debates on Windelband's intellectual development in the context of historicism and Neo-Kantianism. On the other hand, by highlighting the role that Windelband played in furthering philosophical understanding of relativism, I seek to shed light on an important episode in the history of that philosophical problem.

My interpretation distinguishes between three phases in Windelband's writing: the early phase of the 1870s, a mature phase that begins in the early 1880s, and a late phase from roughly 1900 onwards. While the break between the early and the mature phase is a relatively sharp one, the shift from the mature to the late phase is more gradual. About each phase, I defend a specific interpretative claim that highlights the central role that assumptions about history play in Windelband's dealing with relativism. The claims are as follows.

The early Windelband is unaware of the problem of relativism. He thinks that a historicist and psychologistic understanding of logic is compatible with the absolute validity of logical principles. This belief is based on assumptions about historical progress. Where the early Windelband does not even see a tension, the mature Windelband sees an incompatibility. But he goes beyond the conviction – shared by many of his Neo-Kantian contemporaries – that normativity cannot be derived empirically. His novel idea is that any attempt to derive normativity from empirical givens leads to all normative claims being equally justified.

Historicism and psychologism imply relativism.[2] In sharp contrast to his early self, the mature Windelband claims that progress cannot justify normative validity. Windelband is aware that in order to fend off relativism the realms of the empirical and the normative need to be not just separated, but also connected. The later Windelband makes history the connecting link between them, and embraces a circular conception of the methodological relation between philosophy and history.

Taken together, these interpretative claims carry an assessment of Windelband's historical significance. I argue that Windelband was a key figure in the history of relativism. At the time of his writing, relativism and anti-relativism did not yet exist in the form of firmly established philosophical positions or camps. Many of his contemporaries, and even his young self, did not believe historicism or psychologism to be incompatible with absolute normative validity. And even those who did reject the idea that norms could be given an empirical justification did not draw the conclusion that doing so would lead to equal validity. In this context, the mature Windelband's use of the term 'relativism' does not merely serve polemical functions. Rather, it constitutes progress in philosophical understanding. There are points of agreement and disagreement between my interpretation and existing accounts of Windelband's intellectual development, most importantly Klaus Christian Köhnke's sociological approach and Frederick Beiser's systematic reconstruction.

Köhnke (1986, 416–427) places Windelband in the political context of the German Empire. He reads the 'philosophy of values' as a reaction to the political brouhaha that followed the attempted assassination of Kaiser Wilhelm I in 1878. On Köhnke's account, Windelband responded to the crisis by turning away from his earlier relativism, and he developed a philosophy with anti-democratic, anti-socialist and authoritarian overtones. I do not take issue with Köhnke's sociological explanation in this paper. Instead, I target the idea that the shift from the early to the mature phase is adequately described as a turn from relativism to anti-relativism. I argue that this interpretation renders invisible the philosophical innovation that took place when Windelband argued that the 'genetic method' leads to relativism.

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[2] The term 'psychologism' was first introduced to denote the view that psychology should form the starting point and foundation of philosophy (Erdmann 1964 [1866], 670). Incidentally, Windelband was not just among the first philosophers to use the term 'relativism' to signify a philosophical problem, he also pioneered the pejorative use of 'psychologism'. The term 'historicism' had already been around for some time in discussions about Hegel's philosophy of history, when it was taken up by Windelband and soon after by Carl Menger (1884) to criticise the historizisation of entities that the authors took to be ahistorical (norms in the case of Windelband, economic laws in the case of Menger). In the following, I will use the terms 'psychologism' and 'historicism' in a non-pejorative manner. 'Psychologism' refers to the view that logic is based on psychology, and 'historisism' to the view that norms and values are historical entities.

Beiser (2008, 2011, 365–392, 2014, 492–530) gives an internalist reconstruction of Windelband's views. On his reading, Windelband attempted to reformulate the Kantian project so as to accommodate the central insights of historicism, while at the same time avoiding its relativist implications. Beiser finds Windelband's strategy unsuccessful, arguing that the tensions between his historicist commitments and his normative philosophy could not be resolved (2008, 562–564). The interpretation presented in this paper accords with Beiser's general picture. But there are differences on the level of details, especially regarding the shift from the mature to the later Windelband. Beiser traces how, in the course of thinking about how norms can be known by philosophy, the later Windelband was led to a quasi-Hegelian picture of history. But he does not explore in great detail the motivations for this shift, or the exact entry-point and character of Hegelian ideas. I argue that the later Windelband's turn to Hegel was motivated by the failure of the formal method to avoid relativism, and that the shift is best understood as a revision on the methodological level.

The paper is structured in five parts. Since the early Windelband is not well known, I first provide some background to his early views. The second, third, and fourth part deal with the early, mature and later Windelband respectively. In the final part, I evaluate the successes and failures of Windelband's philosophical project and conclude with reflections on his historical significance.

2. Psychological processes and logical principles

Windelband's *Die Erkenntnislehre unter dem völkerpsychologischen Gesichtspunkte* (1875) is often treated as his key relativist publication (see Köhnke 1986, 421–422; Hartung, in press). I begin with providing some background to this text. The article was published in *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, a periodical founded by Moritz Lazarus and Heyman Steinthal with the goal of establishing a new scientific discipline: *Völkerpsychologie.*[3] Its aim was to 'understand *psychologically* the *essence* of the spirit of the people [Volksgeist] … to discover the *laws* that govern the inner, spiritual or ideal practice of a people in life, art and science' (Lazarus and Steinthal 1860, 7)[4]. By specifying the laws that govern the production and development of the creations of the *Volksgeist*, this new discipline would place history on a firm scientific footing (19, 23).

The early Windelband does not write as an advocate of *Völkerpsychologie*. He is not concerned with the question of whether psychological laws are operative on the level of

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[3] For a summary of the main themes and concepts of Völkerpsychologie, see Klautke 2010.
[4] All translations by the author.

collective historical processes, and his interest is in the practical genesis of forms of thinking, not in their explanation by reference to a *Volksgeist*. He does, however, present *Die Erkenntnislehre* as of high significance to the field. This significance is also emphasized in a commentary by Steinthal (1875) which was published as an appendix to Windelband's article. If not a direct influence, *Völkerpsychologie* at least forms one important background to Windelband's early views. A brief look at how Lazarus and Steinthal conceptualize the historicity of human forms of thinking will help to understand some of the ambivalences in Windelband's text, in particular with respect to the question of history and relativism.

As noted, Lazarus and Steinthal think of history as governed by psychological laws. And yet, they observe that history is the realm of freedom and progress, and that, as such, it resists being captured in strictly mechanistic terms. Psychological laws have to be different from mechanistic natural laws in allowing for novelty to occur. They have to contain the 'germ of progress'. According to Lazarus and Steinthal, psychological laws are such that 'new psychic elements emerge through a combinatorial fusion [kombinatorische Verschmelzung]' of existing elements. They claim that the value of the newly created elements will typically be 'greater than that of the original mass' (Lazarus and Steinthal 1860, 17).

Lazarus (2003 [1862]) further develops this thought in a text entitled *Verdichtungen des Denkens in der Geschichte* [condensations of thinking in history]. The main idea is that individual intellectual accomplishments can become condensed into concepts. Subsequent users can then draw on these concepts without having to re-trace the steps that led to the initial accomplishment. What were complex concepts for earlier generations turn into elementary concepts for later generations. ,In these now elementary concepts is condensed the whole sequence of conceptual mediations [Begriffsvermittlungen], through which they have once been slowly and laboriously created' (30). Intellectual progress occurs because later generations build on the conceptual achievements of earlier generations. As I will show later, the concept of *Verdichtung* also plays a central role in Windelband's *Erkenntnislehre*.

But perhaps even more important was a second line of influence. In 1873 Christoph Sigwart published his *Logik*. It almost immediately received a wide and controversial reception. Although its lasting prominence is mainly due to Edmund Husserl (1900), who in his attack on psychologism chose Sigwart's conception of logic as a main target, for many of Sigwart's contemporaries the 'psychologistic' implications of the *Logik* were less obvious than they may seem in retrospect. In his review for *Philosophische Monatshefte*, Windelband (1874, 33–34) presents Sigwart as someone who navigates successfully between the Scylla of merging logic with metaphysics and the Charybdis of reducing it to psychology. A year later, Windelband

frames the views of *Die Erkenntnislehre* as an adaptation and extension of Sigwart's views. It will be useful to take a closer look at Sigwart's *Logik* and its significance for the early Windelband.[5]

The cornerstone of Sigwart's approach is the idea that logic is a normative discipline, a *Kunstlehre des Denkens* (Sigwart 1911 [1873], 11). As such, it prescribes the general rules under which thinking ought to proceed in order to reach the truth. Sigwart defines truth in normative terms, such that truth is nothing other than necessary and universal thought. This normative conception of truth is supposed to make logic independent of metaphysics (7–8, 105–106, 416).

The independence of logic from psychology is a more complex issue. Sigwart claims that the normative character of logic distinguishes it from psychology. Logic is 'not a physics, but an ethics of thinking' (Sigwart 1911 [1873], 23). To highlight the normative character of logical laws, Sigwart introduces the term *Normalgesetz* and sharply distinguishes *Normalgesetze* [normal laws] from *Naturgesetze* [natural laws] (399). Furthermore, he distinguishes between psychological necessity and objective truth. He observes that the activity of making and asserting judgments – and for Sigwart, judgments are the fundamental functions of thinking – always at least implicitly involves claims to the objective truth. When making a judgment, we do not claim that the judgment is psychologically necessary, we claim that it should be endorsed universally and necessarily (262).

Sigwart's views on the relations between logic and psychology are very different from those of 'psychologistic' thinkers like Gerard Heymans and Theodor Lipps who thought that logical laws can be reduced to psychological laws, making logic a mere subdiscipline of psychology (see also Picardi 1997, 168). And it is views like Heymans' and Lipps' that Windelband seems to have in mind when he sees Sigwart steering clear of the conflation of logic and psychology. Husserl (1900, 92 –101, 125–135) of course reached a rather different verdict on the matter. He did not take the appeal to normativity to be sufficient for avoiding 'psychologism'. Moreover, Sigwart did indeed hold the view that logic is meaningful only in the context of actual human thinking, that is psychology. He presents five different arguments that, although developed at different places in his *Logik*, can be brought together to form a consistent 'psychologistic' picture.[6]

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[5] Hartung points to continuities between Adolf Trendelenburg's attempts to reform logic and the early Windelband (see Hartung, in press). This interpretation fits well with the fact that Trendelenburg has also been a central influence for Sigwart, who acknowledges Trendelenburg alongside Friedrich Ueberweg and John Stuart Mill in the preface to the first edition of *Logik*.

[6] At the time, both 'psychologism' and 'anti-psychologism' came in different forms. On the side of psychologism, an important difference is between 'reductivists' like Lipps and Heymans on the one hand, and 'normativists' like

First, Sigwart claims that truth is a property of judgments, and judgments are formed in and by empirical consciousness. Hence, truth is always *truth for* an empirical consciousness (Sigwart 1911 [1873], 262–263).[7] Second, our recognition of the truth and of the logical principles that bring it about rests on a sense of certainty (5–6, 324–327). The whole enterprise of formulating a normative logic 'rests on the possibility of becoming conscious of … fundamental laws and of discovering them as something absolutely evident and certain' (327). Third, logic as a normative enterprise presupposes a volitional element. It depends not only on the availability of logical norms, but also on a purposive *Wahrdenkenwollen* – a will to form and assert true judgments (10). Fourth, volitional thinking that follows the norms of logic is meaningful only against the background of natural, fallible thinking (159). Fifth, to the degree that normative logic is rooted in natural human thinking, it is dependent on specific social and historical conditions (15).

Putting these claims together, we get a picture in which human beings who seek to arrive at true judgments draw on the norms of logic in order to correct and improve upon what is given to them in specific historical circumstances. The norms of logic can be found because they are accompanied by a sense of certainty. By drawing on logical norms, empirical consciousness can make progress and reach the truth, with truth being, as noted above, defined itself in normative terms.

The early Windelband explicitly embraces the normative conception of logic. He applauds Sigwart for having provided an answer to the question as to how ideal norms can fulfil a guiding function for the empirical consciousness.

[H]ow easily it is resolved in the conception of the author! He analyses the laws of the natural process of representation and then he studies the conditions under which these natural laws of thinking can become normal laws. (Windelband 1874, 38)

Note that this passage contains a slight ambiguity: 'the conditions under which natural laws can become normal laws' might refer to the conditions under which certain psychological laws acquire the status of logical norms, or it might refer to the conditions under which logical laws emerge and develop out of natural psychological thinking. The first reading is closer to Sigwart's own account, while the second corresponds to the project that Windelband himself

will propose a year later in *Die Erkenntnislehre*. In this text, he expands Sigwart's normative conception of logic in a way that answers the question of how logical norms emerge from historically situated natural thinking.

3. Historicism cum psychologism

For the early Windelband, just like for Sigwart, logical norms are meaningful only insofar as they are embedded in actual thinking. In his habilitation thesis, *Über die Gewißheit der Erkenntnis* (1873), Windelband put normative logic on a psychological basis, arguing that the justification of knowledge claims is dependent on epistemic purposes that are given psychologically.[8] In *Die Erkenntnislehre* Windelband radicalizes this thought. He now explicitly denies that logical norms have an existence independent of the conscious mind. Rather, their coming into consciousness coincides with their coming into being. It is not just our knowledge of logical forms, our conscious awareness of their binding force that emerges historically, but the norms themselves have a historical origin (Windelband 1875, 167).

Windelband draws on two examples to spell out his idea in some detail: the principle of contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason. In both cases, he points to the social conditions of their emergence. He claims that the principle of contradiction appears together with the distinction between true and false belief. This distinction, in turn, only emerges with social conflict. In a situation 'where one could act only from one viewpoint, but still two people harboured different thoughts about the matter, there had to dawn the awareness that only one of them could be right' (169). The law of sufficient reason receives a similar treatment. According to Windelband, it emerges for the first time when the practical need of deciding between rival views is no longer regulated by brute force. Only in this situation can one decide between different views on the basis of the reasons provided (171).

Windelband thinks of logical principles as psychological laws. He argues that for someone else's reasons to convince me, I have to reproduce in my own consciousness the same psychological, law-governed process that had occurred in the other person's mind (171). Moreover, in clear parallel to Sigwart, Windelband points out that an absolute consciousness has no need for logical laws. Logic is only meaningful in the domain of false belief and disagreement (172). Logical norms only exist for an empirical consciousness confronted with practical problems. And since these practical problems emerge in actual human history, logical principles have historical origins.

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[8] For a concise summary of the main claims of Windelband's *Über die Gewißheit*, see Beiser 2014, 516-519.

As noted above, *Die Erkenntnislehre* is often characterized as Windelband's key relativist text. In the remainder of this section, I want to challenge this interpretation and provide an alternative. I argue that for Windelband, the psychologistic and historicist conception of logic is compatible with the absolute validity of logical principles. Rather than endorsing 'relativism', the early Windelband is unaware of the problem.

Let's begin with the psychologistic and historicist elements of *Die Erkenntnislehre*. Windelband's strategy for historicizing logical principles has two key components. The first is the view that logical principles are rooted in the actual thought processes of the empirical consciousness. This is the type of 'psychologism' that the early Windelband shares with Sigwart, extended by a focus on social conflict and practical problem-solving. The second component is a historicized understanding of human thinking. Steinthal, in his commentary, emphasizes the historicist strand of Windelband's argument. He observes that the consideration of the historical origins of logical principles leads one to think of human psychology in historical terms. Psychology too has to 'consider a real becoming of its objects' and therefore 'becomes historical'. *Völkerpsychologie* 'is not just the psychology of the history of peoples [Völkergeschichte], it is at the same time the history of the soul' (Steinthal 1875, 185). Windelband historicises logic by combining these two elements – a Sigwartian 'psychologistic' view of logic, and a 'historicist' view of psychology.

Note however that Windelband does not declare himself a relativist. Having suggested that different cultures may arrive at different logical principles, he goes on to argue that the absolute validity of logic is not threatened by cultural variability. This is so because logical forms are *Verdichtungen* [condensations] of thinking.

Given this condition, the dignity of logical laws as absolutely valid norms is preserved completely. Sprung from the general forms and purposes of thinking, developed and purified in the balancing movement [ausgleichende Bewegung] of mankind's collective thinking, they keep their title to necessity and universal validity. (Windelband 1875, 177)

The appeal to the 'necessary', 'universal' and 'absolute validity' of logical principles seems to contradict Windelband's own account of their emergence. But he himself does not acknowledge this tension. His text reveals a curious confidence that historicism and psychologism about logic are compatible with the absolute validity of logical principles.

In order to understand the root of this confidence, we have to take a closer look at how Windelband conceptualizes the variability of logical norms. Although he makes logical principles into historical entities, his understanding of their historicity is in many ways quite

tame. First, for Windelband, the validity of logical norms transcends the local contexts in which they emerge. Validity takes the form of a constant means-ends relation such that a certain type of practical purpose always goes hand-in-hand with the same logical principle (168, 176). Second, even when Windelband emphasizes differences between cultures, he thinks of these differences in gradual terms. The picture is one in which the same basic forms of thinking are available to all cultures, with only their degree and 'direction' of development differing from culture to culture (174). Third, and perhaps most importantly, Windelband sees history as progressive. Although logical principles have their origins in specific historical circumstances, 'the balancing movement of mankind's collective thinking' (177) leads to their growth, purification and refinement. As Gerald Hartung points out, Windelband thinks of the development of logical norms as a process of cultivation and progressive adaptation (Hartung, in press). This is clearly expressed in Windelband's use of the concept of *Verdichtung* [condensation], which, as explained above, is introduced by Lazarus in order to provide a psychological mechanism that accounts for intellectual progress. And Windelband argues explicitly that the concept of *Verdichtung* preserves the absolute validity of logical norms (177).

To conclude, while some of the themes developed in *Die Erkenntnislehre* pull in the direction of relativism, others pull the opposite way. Windelband himself did not acknowledge this tension. His firm belief in historical progress made him take the historicist understanding of logic to be compatible with the absolute validity of logical principles.

4. Against relativism

Köhnke (1986, 416–427) interprets Windelband's intellectual development in terms of a radical shift – a conversion from Saul to Paul, from relativist to anti-relativist. Beiser (2014, 527–530) objects to this interpretation on the grounds that it misdates the turning point in Windelband's development, that it renders invisible the continuities between the early and the mature Windelband, and that it misinterprets his political views. My own criticism addresses a different problem: Köhnke does not distinguish between 'relativism' as an actors' category and 'relativism' as an analysts' category. Describing the views of *Die Erkenntnislehre* as 'relativist', without further qualification, obscures the fact that while these views may look relativist to us (the analysts), a precise concept and understanding of relativism was not available to Windelband himself (qua historical actor). When Windelband was writing, relativism and anti-relativism did not constitute known camps in a well-organized philosophical debate. They did not exist as firm and clearly delineated philosophical positions with which an author could align himself. This was especially true for the early Windelband. But even when developing his

conception of critical philosophy in opposition to the 'relativist' implications of historicism and psychologism in the early 1880s, Windelband could not draw on a pre-existing understanding of what kind of problem relativism exactly is. At that time, the concept of relativism had not yet been introduced. One problem with the 'Saul to Paul' interpretation is that it makes invisible a distinct innovation in Windelband's philosophical thinking: he provided a clear argument about how the 'genetic method' of psychologism and historicism leads to relativism. In the following, I reconstruct this philosophical innovation.

From the early 1880s onwards, Windelband uses 'relativism' as a catch-all term for the philosophical evils of his time. He claims that a broad variety of philosophical views have relativism at their core or in their consequences, among them sophism, Protagorean scepticism and nihilism, the encyclopedic project and modern positivism, historicism and psychologism, pragmatism, and individualism (see Windelband 1924 [1882b], 5, 1924 [1883a], 116–117, 132, 1924 [1904], 158, 1927 [1909], 87–89, 1924 [1910], 283–284). The tendency to associate relativism with other conceived intellectual diseases is common at the turn of the century. Examples include Husserl, who links psychologism to 'sceptical relativism' (Husserl 1900, 110) and 'anthropologism' (125), Rickert (1924 [1904], 129) and Lask (1907 [1905], 283) who see historicism, relativism and nihilism as intimately connected, and Gundolf, who criticizes Kantianism for its 'unsensual relativism' (Gundolf 1911, 10) and 'atheism' (33). More often than not, the polemical function of the term 'relativism' goes hand in hand with a disinterest in understanding the problem denoted. In this respect, Windelband is different. Despite his own polemical use of the term, in his *Kritische oder genetische Methode?* (1883) he also develops an account of relativism, of the intellectual practices that it results from, and of its implications for philosophy.

Windelband's argument concerning relativism has two components. The first is the view that normative validity cannot be justified empirically. This idea goes back to Kant's criticism of Hume and it constituted a firmly established topos in the Neo-Kantian literature of the time. The second component is the idea that there exists a plurality of actually accepted norms or normative systems. This idea was put on the agenda by the historical and anthropological sciences. Windelband combines these two thoughts, while going beyond them. He argues that if one tries to justify normative validity empirically, one is left with the equal validity of all normative claims. From the standpoint of empirical acceptance, all normative claims appear to be 'equally justified' (Windelband 1924 [1883a], 115). It is this argument and the introduction of the term 'relativism' to denote it that constitutes Windelband's philosophical innovation.

Let us begin with the first component. Like Sigwart, the early Windelband had thought of logical principles as based on psychology and as having normative character. For the mature Windelband, this view is inconsistent. In order for logical laws, or indeed any normative principle, to have normative validity, it has to be rooted not in empirical consciousness, but in the transcendental a priori. Windelband was not the first to formulate this view of normativity. As R. Lanier Anderson (2005) points out, the thought that normativity had to be anchored in the a priori constituted the central motivation for a specifically neo-Kantian version of late-nineteenth-century anti-psychologism, which existed alongside the anti-psychologism of Frege and Husserl. Despite the many profound differences between Hermann Cohen and Hermann Lotze, both introduced a firm distinction between aprioricity as the basis of normativity and psychological innateness, and both argued fiercely against conflating the two. Sometime after 1875, Windelband adopted the idea that norms, in order to claim universal and necessary validity, must have an apriori basis.

Indeed, although Windelband refrains from attributing a metaphysical status to the transcendental a priori, and treats the distinction between the normative and the natural as a purely discursive one, he puts a particularly strong emphasis on this distinction. From the early 1880s onwards, he repeatedly states that it is essential for philosophy to uphold this boundary. On his account, the concern of philosophy is not a *quaestio facti* but a *quaestio juris* (Windelband 1924 [1882b], 26). Although philosophy is a 'science', and not a *Weltanschauung*, it is actually a second-order inquiry concerned with the investigation and justification of the fundamental norms or axioms that govern human conduct in the domains of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. The goal of philosophy is to reveal and to justify these norms: '*the problem of philosophy is the validity of axioms*' (Windelband 1924 [1883a], 108).

In *Kritische oder genetische Methode?* Windelband distinguishes between two possible strategies for pursuing this task. The 'critical method' proceeds on the basis of formal and teleological considerations:

[F]or the critical method these axioms, regardless of the extent to which they are actually accepted, are norms which ought to be valid if thinking wants to fulfil the purpose of being true, volition the purpose of being good, and feeling the purpose of capturing beauty, in a manner that warrants universal validation. (Windelband 1924 [1883a], 109)

The genetic method, in contrast, proceeds by generalizing from the forms of cognition, volition and taste which have, as a matter of fact, emerged and become accepted historically. Windelband thinks that the construction of empirical theories about actually accepted norms is

a legitimate scientific enterprise. But problems emerge when the genetic method oversteps its boundaries and pretends that it can reveal and justify normative validity (113).

This is where the second component of Windelband's argument comes into play. Plurality and variance play a central role in explaining how the genetic method leads to relativism. Since there is variation both within and between cultures regarding which axioms are actually accepted or prevalent, the genetic method can never establish their universal validity. 'The universally valid can be found neither by inductive comparison of all individuals and peoples nor by deductive inference from … the 'essence' of man.' (115). Moreover, Windelband argues that natural psychological processes lead to both true and false beliefs. Psychology does not distinguish between beliefs that should be endorsed as universally and necessarily true and beliefs lacking this status. Hence, the genetic method has no means for distinguishing between valid and invalid norms, or between true and false beliefs. It has to treat all normative judgments and beliefs as equally justified. Windelband elaborates on this point in some detail with respect to psychology. In the course of his argument, he reaches an understanding of the problem of relativism and how it comes about.

From a psychological perspective … all these apperceptions are equally necessary, and it is absolutely not apparent how, from this perspective, it should ever be decided that one is more justified than the other. Both the genetic explanation and factual apprehension [tatsächliche Konstatierung] treat all [apperceptions] in the same way. For [the genetic explanation], there is thus no absolute measure; it must treat all beliefs as *equally justified* [gleichberechtigt] because they are all equally necessary by nature [naturnotwendig]. For [the genetic explanation], all these general sentences and the evaluations based on them *only have relative value*, in part relative to the standpoint of the individual, in part relative to the collective psychic life of a historically determined society. Hence *relativism* is the *necessary consequence* of the purely empiricist treatment of philosophy's cardinal question. (115-116, my emphasis)

Under the condition that validity is reduced to actual prevalence, and under the further condition that there is a plurality of actually prevalent norms and beliefs, the problem of relativism arises. Given the passage cited above, there is some room for interpretation whether Windelband thinks that the problem of equal justification *amounts to* relativism or whether it merely *leads to* but is not identical with relativism. Note however that in the passage cited, Windelband does not clearly distinguish between the claim that all beliefs are equally justified and the claim that all beliefs have only relative validity. In his understanding, by making all claims valid relative to individuals and societies the genetic method must also conclude that all these claims are equally justified. For Windelband, relative validity and equal justification are one and the same problem. And it is this problem that is identified as 'relativism'.

As recapitulated above, the early Windelband's belief in historical progress made him think of historicism as compatible with absolute validity. It is thus not surprising that when the mature Windelband formulates his argument about relativism, he does so in full awareness that historical progress cannot provide an antidote. In his *Pessimismus und Wissenschaft* from 1876, he had already raised doubts about whether the moral development of mankind should be seen in progressive terms, arguing that the dispute between historical optimism and pessimism cannot be decided by scientific means (Windelband 1924 [1876], 243). In 1883, he repeats the point with respect to relativism. He observes that in order to determine whether a given historical development amounts to progress, we need a criterion 'which determines the value of change' (Windelband 1924 [1883a], 119). Establishing that the historical process is directed towards presently accepted norms will not suffice. An unfortunate tendency in human history could have led to 'delusions and follies … which we only take to be truths now because we are unescapably trapped in them' (121). The concept of progress presupposes an absolutely valid norm. Therefore, the appeal to progress cannot justify such a norm without circularity.

We have now reached a clearer picture of the transformations that surround the mature Windelband's conceptual innovation. In *Zur Erkenntnislehre* Windelband thinks of history in progressive terms. For this reason, he does not see the potential tensions between his genetic approach and claims to absolute validity. But by the 1880s, Windelband realizes that progress cannot ground validity. Without the presupposition of an absolute norm, historical research can only yield knowledge about the plurality of actually accepted norms. If validity is then also reduced to actual acceptance, relativism results: all accepted norms have an equal title to validity.

5. *The return to history*

As Paul Ziche (2015, 208-209) observes, Windelband tends to undermine distinctions that he himself has introduced. This is especially true for the distinction between the normative and the natural. Quite evidently, for us to be guided by norms, and for critical philosophy to be capable of revealing and justifying their validity, these norms have to enter empirical consciousness. Hence, among the central questions of philosophy is that of how 'the realm of laws relate[s] to the realm of norms' (Windelband 1924 [1904], 162). In Windelband's mature works, we can discern two basic strategies for dealing with the problem. As we will see, both have their limitations.

The first strategy Windelband explores in *Normen und Naturgesetze* (1882). Introduced as a contribution to the problem of human freedom, the text also responds to the ongoing debates

about the relation between logic and psychology. As noted, many philosophers at the time advocated the strict identity of logical and psychological laws. For example, Lipps claimed that the logical rules of correct thinking 'are nothing else than the rules one has to follow in order to think as required by the nature [Eigenart] of thinking' (Lipps 1880, 531). Against the background of these debates, Windelband tries to show that although norms are natural laws, they also possess an irreducible normative force. His starting point is the idea that norms, rather than being coextensive with natural laws, constitute a subset of thereof:

All norms are … particular realizations of natural laws. The system of norms constitutes a *selection* from the vast variety of combinations, under which, depending on individual circumstances, the natural laws of psychic life can unfold. (Windelband 1924 [1882a], 72—73)

Of the many possible realizations of natural laws, norms are those which guide individual conduct 'with necessity and universal validity' (141) and which should be approved for the 'purpose of universal validity' (74). The *Normalbewusstsein* is nothing other than the subset of natural laws which merit the status of universal and necessary validity. Windelband goes on to argue that norms can act on the individual consciousness because they carry their own motivational force. The extent to which norms can motivate is different in each individual since it depends on circumstances and personal histories. But as soon as a norm enters empirical consciousness, it begins to co-determine it (85–86).

Windelband thus answers the question of how norms are accessible to the empirical consciousness and how they motivate the individual. Remember, though, that the goal of critical philosophy was not just to give a possibility proof of the accessibility and motivational force of absolute norms. The goal was to reveal and justify these norms. Regarding this task, the approach pursued in *Normen und Naturgesetze* has clear limitations because the content of the *Normalbewusstsein* remains unspecific. The only hint in this direction is Windelband's statement that what discriminates norms from other natural laws is the purpose of universal validity. But how does this help the task of finding and justifying specific norms?

This is where Windelband's second strategy kicks in. It consists of an attempt to justify specific norms – or normative 'contents' – on the basis of purely formal considerations, in particular teleological considerations. Windelband pursues this strategy in *Vom Prinzip der Moral* (1883). Interestingly, he motivates his reflections by evoking the threat of relativism:

Every man claims universal validity for his moral judgments, but when one looks closer, one finds such differences in the content of what counts as a standard, already from individual to individual but even more from people to people and from epoch to epoch, that one … despairs

of finding a universally valid, substantial principle of moral judgment. (Windelband 1924 [1883b], 161)

The challenge is to reveal the highest substantial principles of ethics by recourse to formal means. Windelband starts by identifying *Pflichtbewusstsein* – the awareness of moral imperatives – as a condition of all moral life. Then he determines the 'formal' obligations that are required to fulfil any moral imperative: self-control, thoughtfulness and willpower. However, since these traits can also serve immoral ends, *Pflichtbewusstsein* is not enough to ground a moral system (164–169). The next step is to connect the formal method with reflections about the historical conditions of moral life. Morality, Windelband claims, 'is rooted in the relation of the individual to his society' (173). The individual has certain 'social obligations' towards his society, such as law-abidance and respect for life and property. But society is not a means in itself, and therefore, an individual has 'social obligations' only to the extent that fulfilling them contributes to the realization of the '*obligations of society*' (177). The highest obligation of society, in turn, is the realization of the social *Gesamtbewusstein*. By developing its collective consciousness, and by expressing it in a cultural system, each society strives 'from its natural foundation upwards, to make appear that which is absolutely universally valid' (192).

But unfortunately, this is where the strategy of justifying norms on the basis of teleological considerations reaches its limit. Windelband realizes that even if there are absolutely valid moral principles that can be revealed by teleological reflection, their character leaves room for a plurality of different cultural systems to arise historically. And different cultures may embrace different moral prescriptions.

Each [society] is prescribed a collective consciousness by its natural and historical determinations … Therefore, the particular ideas, feelings and volitions in which a society must articulate its cultural system differ from one society to the next. Only here one finds the roots of that historical element which in the particular prescriptions of morality is inextinguishable. (Windelband 1924 [1883b], 191)

But it was this plurality and the threat of relativism that it harboured which had motivated the search for absolute norms in the first place. We can only conclude that the formal method is incapable of eliminating the threat of relativism.

Beiser (2008, 561–562, 2011, 390–392, 2014, 510-511) recapitulates how Windelband was led towards ever stronger concessions to historicism and, ultimately, to a quasi-Hegelian

picture of history. But he does not explore in great detail the motivations for this shift. At one point, he suggests that the turn to Hegel was less a concession to an adversary, than an expression of deep historicist commitments (Beiser 2008, 562). While it is certainly true that Windelband held strong historicist convictions, this should not obscure the fact that his turn to Hegel was motivated by the failure of the formal method to avoid relativism. As I have shown, purely formal means proved unable to carry out the task of revealing and justifying normative contents. The reconsideration of the role of history that preoccupied Windelband in his late writings responds to this failure.

Another unclarity in Beiser's reconstruction concerns the exact entry-point of Hegelian ideas. Beiser claims that Windelband never crosses the line of allowing history to justify norms, and that he does not adopt Hegelian views of necessity in history (Beiser 2014, 510). But if this is the case, what are we to make of Windelband's appeals to the 'realization of reason' in history? In the following, I try to provide a better understanding of the late Windelband's 'Hegelianism'. In agreement with Erik Kreiter (2002), I argue that Windelband's turn to Hegel takes place primarily at the methodological level. In particular, the later Windelband thinks of history and philosophy as related in a methodological circle. Talk about the 'realization of reason' in history can be understood as an application of this methodology.

In the 1880s Windelband had already argued that insight into the history of norms can provide the 'empirical occasion' for philosophical reflection and criticism (Windelband 1924 [1883a], 132). First signs of a willingness to grant history a more central role become visible in his writings on the history of philosophy. Windelband argues that the history of philosophy is an integral part of philosophy since the object that philosophy seeks to understand is itself a historical object (Windelband 1907 [1905], 536). Although the 'normative determinations of reason' have atemporal and non-empirical validity, empirical consciousness comes to appreciate them only in and through the historical process (537—538). The historical process is always at the same time a product of contingent, cultural determinants, and of atemporal normative determinations. The goal of the history of philosophy is nothing other than distinguishing between the two types of factors (189, see also Windelband 1921 [1892],13).

If the history of philosophy … untangles the different threads of the historical genesis of [philosophical] systems, *temporal causes* and *timeless reasons* separate themselves automatically. Therein lies [the] critical achievement [of the history of philosophy] and its contribution to philosophy (Windelband 1907 [1905], 544).

Windelband never explains how the history of philosophy can 'untangle the different threads' such as to separate 'temporal causes and timeless reasons'. But he is well aware that every historical reconstruction has to select from the bulk of historical events those that are significant, and that the determination of significance depends on the goals of the reconstruction (Windelband 1924 [1894], 153–154, 1907 [1905], 545). The question is, of course, whether the distinction between 'temporal causes' and 'timeless reasons' depends on specific philosophical goals. Put differently, do we need a philosophical pre-conception of reason in order to distinguish the timeless determinations of reasons from contingent, cultural factors? Windelband does not fully answer this question in his *Geschichte der Philosophie*. But two years later, he explicitly describes the relation between history and philosophy in terms of circular dependency. On the one hand, selection and concept formation in history depends on a universally valid system of norms provided by philosophy. On the other hand, philosophy reaches its critical theory of values only on the basis of insights into the 'progressive realization of the values of reason' (Windelband 1924 [1907], 20).

The later Windelband's 'Hegelianism' is highly selective and takes its cues less from Hegel's substantive claims about the essence of the historical process than from his general methodological outlook. I thus focus on the methodological passages of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of world-history to illuminate how the later Windelband thinks about the role of history in relation to philosophy. Hegel (1955 [1830], 25–49) argues that the relation between philosophy and the empirical study of history is inescapably circular. In line with his repeated attacks on the pretence of immediacy, he emphasizes that there can be no purely empirical study of history. Having established that all historical knowledge depends on a conceptual grasp, he goes on to claim that philosophy introduces only one assumption in order to make history intelligible – the assumption that the historical process is *vernünftig*. On the basis of this assumption the study of the empirical material of history can disclose what is essential in history, ultimately revealing the progressive realization of reason in the development of human freedom. Rather than imposing unempirical aprioristic constructions on history, the philosopher uncovers the rational within it. Hence, reason is both the starting point, and the result of historical reconstruction.

Beiser is right to emphasize that Windelband does not see history as a necessary process. Windelband does not accept Hegel's 'panlogism' and explicitly criticizes the parallelism between historical chronology and philosophical systematicity (Windelband 1907 [1905], 531). What the later Windelband accepts, however, is the idea that a philosophically guided history can reveal how reason – in the form of absolute norms – is expressed and realized in the

progressive history of humankind. For the later Windelband, the concept of *Verwirklichung* becomes central. He now pictures history as a process of the realization of norms and emphasizes that the task of finding, acknowledging and acting according to norms has to be accomplished in and through history (Windelband 1924 [1904], 162–166, 1924 [1908], 254–256). 'Man as a rational being is not psychologically given, but historically assigned [aufgegeben]. Only as historical beings, as developing species, do we have a share in universal reason [Weltvernunft]' (Windelband 1924 [1910], 283).

These statements make sense if viewed as applications of a methodology that allows the formation of historical concepts to be guided by a philosophy of reason. By embracing also the other half of the circle, the dependence of philosophy on history, Windelband hopes to escape relativism: a philosophically informed historiography reveals the operation of reason in history. As such, it carries the promise of escaping the 'conflict of opinions' and gaining a 'measure for the determination' of the value of our thinking (Windelband 1924 [1908], 252).[9]

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have analysed the main shifts in Windelband's 'critical philosophy of values'. My reconstruction shows that ideas about history played a central role in shaping the philosophical understanding of relativism. The early Windelband did not think of his own views as having relativistic implications because he firmly believed in historical progress. The mature Windelband analysed the threatening relativist implications of attempts to ground normativity empirically, while at the same time rejecting the appeal to historical progress as justificatory strategy. He sought to secure critical philosophy by a double strategy of, on the one hand, sharply distinguishing between the normative and the natural, and on the other hand, exploring how the two realms are connected. The later Windelband reacted to the shortcomings of the formal method in bridging this gap, and strengthened the role of history. He ultimately revised his methodology, embracing a methodological circle between philosophy and history. In this development, the role of assumptions about history shifts together with their content. In the first shift, historical progress turned from a taken-for-granted assumption to something that needed justification itself. Without progress, history then became a source of relativist threats. In the

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[9] Beiser (2014, 510–511) notes that there is a deep historical irony in Windelband's return to Hegel. There is yet another dimension to this irony. By thinking of the relation between philosophy and history in circular terms, and by attributing to history a double status – as a source of relativist problems, and as a solution to these problems – Windelband has moved surprisingly close to his rival Wilhelm Dilthey. After all, it was Dilthey who thought that 'the knife of historical relativism, which has cut through all metaphysics and religion, must also bring about healing' (Dilthey 1960 [1903], 234). Despite his lifelong reservations against the 'critique of historical reason', the late Windelband was harbouring similar hopes.

second shift, history turned from a source of problems to a means for solving these problems. Windelband now believed that by bringing philosophy and history closer together, history could help to overcome the relativist threat.

I want to conclude with an evaluation of Windelband's arguments against relativism, and an assessment of his significance as a philosopher. I begin with the self-refutation charge as formulated by the mature Windelband. Windelband argues that relativism presupposes the very epistemic norms and logical axioms that it challenges. The more the relativist tries to prove the validity of his claims, the more he makes use of universal and necessary norms, and the more he refutes himself (Windelband 1924 [1883a], 116-117). Windelband's self-refutation charge remains somewhat superficial. Windelband does not acknowledge the possibility of a relativist who accepts that the presuppositions on which his claims are based are not universally and necessarily valid, but only valid for those who happen to accept them as a result of contingent human history. As long as the relativist and his opponent accept the same (contingent, non-universal) norms, the relativist might still be able to prove to his opponent the validity of his claims. These claims would not be valid for everyone at every time, but they would still be valid for both the relativist and his opponent.

In order to understand why Windelband cannot conceive of this possibility, we need to address an ambiguity in his concept of relativism. Although Windelband provides a clear argument about how relativism comes about, he runs together two claims, both supposedly held by the relativist: the claim that all historically accepted norms are equally valid, and the claim that there are no valid norms at all. The relativist does not just relativize norms, but he 'combats' their validity (Windelband 1924 [1883a], 116). From Windelband's perspective, these two ideas are almost indistinguishable. He presupposes that what constitutes the essence of a norm, what makes a norm a norm, is exactly its universal and necessary validity. Hence, by denying norms their universal and necessary validity, relativism strips them of those features that make them into norms in the first place. We can now begin to understand why Windelband did not acknowledge the possibility of a consistent relativism, and why, in the late nineteenth century, relativism so frequently was run together with sophism, scepticism and nihilism: on the presupposition that without universal and necessary validity, there cannot be norms, relativism has a highly destructive character. It leads to the conclusion that there are no valid norms at all.

And yet, the self-refutation charge was not sufficient for combating the relativist threat. The naturalistic, psychologistic and historicist currents in the scientific and philosophical landscape of the time lent the genetic approach to validity some prima facie plausibility. In this context, the burden of proof was on the critical philosophy. It had to provide not only an account

of how the empirical consciousness can come to know absolute norms in principle, but also a methodology for discovering the actual system of absolute values, or normative contents.

As I have shown, the formal-teleological strategy was insufficient for the task. It is questionable whether the later Windelband's 'Hegelian' methodology is more successful. Windelband assumes that the circular relation between philosophy and history ensures that reason – the realization of absolute norms – can be discovered in history. In the case of Hegel, it is clear how this can work: philosophy already occupies the standpoint of universal reason. From this standpoint it can reveal how reason realizes itself within the progressive process of human history. Conversely, philosophy occupies the standpoint of universal reason precisely because it is itself the product of the progressive self-realization of the absolute spirit. Hegel's metaphysics of history and his understanding of the methodology of the philosophy of history support one another.

But this is not the case for Windelband. As noted above, the late Windelband endorses Hegel's methodology but not his metaphysics of history. He sees history as contingent, a view most clearly expressed in his statement that history could have led to delusions 'which we only take to be truths now because we are unescapably trapped in them' (Windelband 1924 [1883a], 121). The processes which realize absolute norms coexist alongside contingent causal factors. But unfortunately, this view of history also undercuts the effectiveness of the Hegelian methodology in revealing the operation of reason in history. How can Windelband be sure that the philosophical assumptions that guide the historical discovery of the progressive realization of norms in history are not themselves 'delusions', an unfortunate product of contingent human history? Windelband never takes up this challenge. The source and status of the philosophical starting point for the historical reconstruction remain altogether unclear. Windelband never carried out the actual task of finding normative contents by historical means.

The significance of Windelband's engagement with relativism lies not in his proposed solutions. Rather, it lies in his having furthered understanding of the problem. Windelband was among the very few philosophers who went beyond the merely polemical use of the term 'relativism'. In the context of late nineteenth-century debates, the idea that the attempt to ground normativity empirically leads to the equal validity of all normative claims constitutes genuine progress. By formulating this argument and giving the resulting problem the status of a philosophical '-ism', Windelband created a reference point for subsequent discussions and made it possible for relativism to be recognized as an independent topic worthy of philosophical attention.

Acknowledgements

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