

H. Cohen and E. Cassirer: the Foundations of Kant's Ethics

Leonid Tetyuev

Saratov State University

Saratov, Russia

E-mail: tetjuewl@mail.ru

Abstract—The subject for analysis in this article is the foundations of Kant's ethics in the Neo-Kantian philosophy of the Marburg school. This article draws the parallel between the ethics of H. Cohen and P. Natorp. In contrast to E. Cassirer's teachers, who defined ethics as an important part of philosophy, Cassirer did not write a separate work on ethics. Cassirer turns to Kant's ethics not only with the purpose of revealing the special features of his own critical method, but mostly because he tries to reconstruct its original philosophical principles: the concept of autonomy, the concept of freedom and individual personality, which became the starting point for the system of ethical idealism. The boundary between the personal cognition and world conception lies between being and oughtness, the necessary and the possible. We can find the motives of Cassirer's critical position in the late period of his creative work, when the philosopher reveals the transcendental history of the moral consciousness in "The Myth of the State".

Keywords—*Kant's critical ethics; the method of transcendental philosophy; neo-Kantianism of H. Cohen and E. Cassirer; freedom; autonomy; individual personality; philosophical ethics*

I. INTRODUCTION

The most important achievement of neo-Kantianism is the further creative development of Kantian criticism, the revelation of the original idea of his transcendental philosophy – the understanding of the conditions of possible experience and the applicability of the transcendental study of method. In the substantiation of scientific knowledge Neo-Kantianism turns to the history of science, primarily to the history of mathematics and natural history of early Modern period, to the humanitarian potential of sciences, dating back to Renaissance and Enlightenment. In this respect, the theory of knowledge in the history of philosophy and science appears to be the history of problems, where the heroes are Galileo, Descartes, Leibniz and Kant.

E. Cassirer, following H. Cohen [1], stresses the specific meaning of the transcendental method for the critique of cognition, because it is exactly the place, where, according to his opinion, Kant's originality and mission are most visibly represented in their full form. *Cassirer notices, that the basis for Kant's ethical theory is the same "revolutionary method of thought", that was developed by him in the critique of reason, and that defined all subsequent transcendental question formulation: the "transcendental" method means*

every method of consideration the subjects that starts from our method of cognition of any subjects, and not from the subjects as such. ("die sich in der Vernunftkritik vollzieht, wurzelt in der transzendentalen Problemstellung; 'transzendental' aber heißt diejenige Betrachtungsweise, die nicht sowohl von den Gegenständen als von unserer Erkenntnisart von Gegenständen überhaupt ihren Ausgang nimmt") [2]. *The perspective of Kantian critical ethics should be understood in the light of this conceptual definition.* In this meaning, the critical philosophy of Kant is accepted as the methodological basis in the foundations and systematical deducing of ethical principles. For H. Cohen the theoretical a priori appears to be the basis for deducing the practical a priori. In the work "Kant's Foundations of Ethics" [3], he transforms the ethics through the interpretation of Kantian "thing in itself" ("Ding an sich") as the idea, which appeals to the concepts of inborn individuality and purposiveness in the perspective of understanding the ultimate goal. In this statement, Cohen sees the source for the possible foundations of both the natural theology and the ethics. It is the sphere of ethics that is able to reveal the regulative meaning of the idea of freedom. The ethics and its reality cannot be deduced from the principles of anthropology, the goal of the ethics goes over the natural being of a man, because the moral is conceived not as the being that "is", but the being as it "ought to be". The matter concerns the possible existence of "pure will", from the mere concept of which the formulation of the moral law can be deduced. The form of "volition" (Wollen) includes "oughtness" (Sollen) as its contents [4]. Moral reality is formed on the nature of "a reasonable man" and implies personality as its contents. Actually, the ultimate goal turns out to be the existence (Dasein) of personality as a reasonable being. Based on the reasonable origin and the ultimate goal of the moral law of humanity, it is the human personality that cannot be a natural thing, but appears to be the ideal image. The moral law a priori implies the existence in the world of the autonomous reasonable personality, who endowed with "self-legislative will". According to the head of the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism, the identification of the concrete moral a priori appears now to be the problem of theoretical cognition itself.

II. ORIGINAL BASIS FOR THE NEO-KANTIAN THEORY OF PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS

The study of Kant's ethics in the Marburg Neo-Kantianism performed in the context of critical philosophy of Hermann Cohen, the founder of the school. Cohen continues to develop the Kantian idea of transcendental idealism, but still tries to "transcend" him. The determined motive of "transcendence" can be explained by his divergence with the subsequent post-Kantian idealism. We may say that Cohen rediscovers the classical idealism that ascends to Plato and Kant himself.

Ethics for Cohen is the most important subject in the systematics of philosophy: ethics is considered as the theory of a man and therefore it is the central moment in the system of philosophy. Philosophy gains its unity, diversity and autonomy only within the ethics. At first sight, it seems that Cohen denies the accepted in the Baden school of Neo-Kantianism primacy of practical reason over theoretical; however, it would be more properly understood as the attempt to set limits for the theoretical reason, which is bound up with mathematical natural science. Since the problem of a man cannot be embraced by the theoretical categories and conceived dogmatically in a metaphysical sense, the question about the limits of the experience of theoretical reason inevitably arises. The being of nature is confronted by the being of oughtness in its original meaning of the word: it is Cohen's understanding of Kant's foundations of ethics.

Originally, Ernst Cassirer maintains the position of Cohen's philosophy and considers the critique of knowledge as the basis for the critique of reason. In the evolution of his views, the philosopher goes beyond the limits of Neo-Kantian transcendentalism and seeks common ground with the ideas from Husserl and Hegel, Dilthey and Scheler. Nevertheless, though his critique of knowledge develops into the critique of culture, it is realized exceptionally within the limits of the Marburg Neo-Kantianism. As V. Belov fairly notices, the grounding for critical conception of Cassirer appears to be not the activity of reason, but the "original act of the spirit" (*Handlungsursprung von Geist*) [5]. And this, as we can see, leads to the widening of the problems and the subject of philosophy, reconsideration of its basic characteristics and principles. The outlines of a new philosophical ethics reveal themselves in Cassirer's development of three basic principles — systematicity, rationality and ideality.

III. AUTONOMOUS AND FREE PERSONALITY — THE CORE OF NEO-KANTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS

Two approaches were formed in the foundations of the ethics in the Marburg school. The first approach confirmed the principle that the theory of knowledge already could not help originating from oughtness; the second one was based on the fact of science [6]. The most important concept in the first case appears to not be the concept of freedom, but the concept of oughtness, which bridges the gap between the theoretical and practical reason. The regulative idea of the infinite continuation of experience is implicitly contained in

the theoretical oughtness, which is adjoined by the practical oughtness. References to Kant, who in the "Critique of Pure Reason" ponders "over the rule of the progress of experience, in which the subjects, namely appearances are given to me" ("um die Regel des Fortschritts der Erfahrung, in der mir die Gegenstände, nämlich Erscheinungen") (B 524) [7], are considered to be convincing enough in this particular case. And already Natorp forms the logic of his reasonings supported by the individual learning experience, which he understands as "the task", where "the oughtness" already is [8].

It is not surprising that in this connection different kinds of perplexity appear at once, because the statement that the matter concerns also the ethical oughtness at the same time, seems to be doubtful. And still the ethics of oughtness is understood in Neo-Kantianism as the logic of oughtness. The substantial point for the logic of oughtness is most successively developed in Natorp's works. For him, all contents of cognition or "experience" must be reduced to the "law of oughtness". H. Holzhey prepares the ground with the help of these for the normative, linked with the instructions "deontisation" of the learning experience [9].

The second variant of Neo-Kantian interpretation of ethics ascends to Cohen's "Ethics of Pure Will" (1904) [10], the basis of which is the fact of diversity of liberal sciences — *Geistwissenschaften* (sciences morales). Just as "philosophy refers to science and art to nature" [11], the same is the meaning of natural sciences towards liberal sciences: nature and "moral culture" become open for cognition. This becomes possible due to the operation of the normative law of human will. Still Cohen defines ethics as the study of a man, and not as the study of a good will. Already here he sees the groundings for "critical ethics of Kant": "Ethics as the theory of a man becomes the central point of philosophy. And only within it, philosophy gains its independence and diversity, and right after this — its unity" [12]. Ethics is, therefore, understood as the method of liberal sciences.

But, if Cohen and Natorp see ethics as the constitutive element of the system of philosophy, Cassirer leaves ethics undeveloped despite the significance of the ethical question in the context of his own philosophy. If we consider the fact that in Kant's ethics Cohen saw the ideal of completion of the system of interpretation of Kantian critical philosophy for the philosophy of Neo-Kantianism, the question arises: why Cassirer did not write any ethics, despite the acceptance of the primacy of practical reason? [13]

Indeed, why did not he find a place for ethics either in the system of the "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms", where there are described such forms of symbolic manifestations of the spirit as language, myth, religion and science, or in the general program of cultural philosophy? Even in "An Essay on Man" in 1944 the philosopher intensifies the role of art in life, but he does not say a word about morality; he only documents the obviousness of ethical ideas.

B. Recki in the article "Culture without morality?" that is devoted to Cassirer asks himself — How is culture possible without morality, if morality is cultural subsystem of norms

and values? The author of the article suggests that everything that German philosopher overcame during the time of the Weimar republic and the National Socialist hegemony should be treated as some “reflexive material”. Ethics for him was both theoretically and existentially alien, Recki states [14].

E. Orth holds to a different opinion. For him, Cassirer, as all his contemporaries – Heidegger and Adorno, possessed a special understanding of the significance of practical philosophy. “All Cassirer’s thinking as a whole was imbued with ethics” [15].

Here we should notice that a range of works exist, where the philosopher discussed the problems of practical philosophy – morality, politics and law. Thus, right after the World War I in 1916 Cassirer writes his work “Freedom and Form”, that has not been translated into Russian until now, where he as the European thinker unambiguously speaks against the polarization of “the depths of German culture” and “superficiality” of European – German, Italian and French – thinking, that serves as the basis for civilization. Though philosophical ideas originate in the context of “national culture”, it should still be taken into account, that their practical usage “exceeds the limits of any specifically national conditions and restrictions” [16].

This concerns not only Kantian idea of autonomy. Using as an example the development of German culture from Luther till Hegel Cassirer, the concept of intellectual development of modern science evolves, which motive is the unity of scientific and humanitarian knowledge. And still in the modern culture, it is tragically forgotten that the constitutive element of culture is the general ethos of freedom. Freedom that is directed towards cognition is also self-knowledge, because freedom opens new perspectives of cognition. It is not the natural inclination of a man, and primarily, it is necessary to create it in order to possess it. Upon that freedom, being the universal medium, does not encroach on the specific peculiarity and autonomy of every separate sphere of spirit. Moreover, in transcendental philosophy, freedom acts as the constitutive element of being as such.

In 1918, Cassirer published his study “Kant’s Life and Thought” [17], where he discussed the problem of morals and reveals the specific nature of critical ethics in detail. In the introduction the philosopher writes that the manuscript was ready for publishing in the spring of 1916 and it can be supposed that the work “Freedom and Form” was being written by him either at the same time or was motivated by it.

And still we should not overlook one circumstance. Kant in that period of history in Germany appears to be especially German philosopher, and the understanding of the links between Kantian philosophy and main problems of the spiritual life of Germany was very important. For Cassirer Kant is “the individual thinking personality” (als individuelle Denkerpersönlichkeit) [18]. He considers that Kantian philosophy can be understood in the right way only if we try to understand its genetic construction. The chapter dedicated to Kant’s ethics is titled: “The construction of critical ethics”.

It should be mentioned that the philosopher at once accepts the initial viewpoint of Kant himself, that he did not plan the “Critique of Practical Reason” as the second theoretical part of his system. It is particularly specified that his study, primarily conceived as the separate unit, comprises the ethical problems as the integrating moment. The genuine deep understanding of a “reason”, as Kant sees it, may be gained only with the help of such a correlation, Cassirer writes [19].

Evaluating the basis for Kantian critical ethics, Cassirer remains extremely accurate. It is important for Cassirer that Kant turns to the new formulation of ethical problem in 1764 in his work “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime”. It is namely here, Cassirer stresses, that along with the pure “apriority” of knowledge the existence of a priori morals is established for the first time. In this point Cassirer observes the first step of Kant in his foundations of ethics, his break with the traditional eudaemonistic foundations of morals. It is already obvious, Cassirer writes, that Kant “gained a complete insight into himself and created the adequate expression in a conscious contradiction to Enlightenment philosophy” (“aber hier erst hat es sich völlig begriffen und sich, im bewußten Gegensatz zur Philosophie des Aufklärungszeitalters, and seinen adäquaten philosophischen Ausdruck geschaffen”) [20].

A Neo-Kantian philosopher observes the original foundations of “formalistic” character of Kantian ethics in a “general transcendental idea of form”. Cassirer understands “form” as “every energy of the freedom of spirit”, by means of which “spiritual contents of meaning” inwardly correspond to the form. Trinity of the “form”, “spiritual significance” and “the energy of spirit” (energeia von Geist) has methodological meaning for him. According to Cassirer, Kant places the concept of “form” as the form of pure contemplation and the form of pure discursive understanding on a practical plane. The Neo-Kantian philosopher considers that it is necessary for him to gain the new basic notion of ethics — the notion of autonomy. “Autonomy, — Cassirer writes — means the link between theoretical and moral reason, where the moral reason conceives itself” as binding (“Die Autonomie bedeutet jene Bindung der theoretischen wie der sittlichen Vernunft, in der diese sich selbst als des Bindenden bewußt wird”) [21].

Cassirer explains the Kantian dualism of being and oughtness according to the principle of freedom: we do not deal with the objective world of things, but with the world of free personalities, not with the whole complex and causal link between the objects, but with the structure and objective unity of autonomous agents [22]. In this regard, personality is understood as “self-confident unity”. The ideas of goal in itself and final goal are only completed in it. The personality itself in virtue of its original legislation gives the maxim of its volition, and therefore it appears to be the expression of its “intelligible” character. Cassirer stresses the fact that not the price of the things has an important meaning, but the value, that every subject adds to itself, the point, that it sees in itself the creator of his individual and at the same time general definition of will. According to Cassirer, the new point of view that Kant presents by the demand of oughtness

is the exceptional grounding of confidence, which is found in the understanding of an ethical law as the law of freedom [23].

Cassirer's thought about freedom and dignity of every person is a sort of an attempt to reconstruct the moral consciousness, the basis for which is not the ability of knowledge, but the ability of formation of will, that is the process of acting self-determination. But if freedom cannot be the subject of theoretical comprehension, how is ethics possible as science in this case? Is not it the place where the answer is hidden, why Cassirer did not write his own ethics? The dispute among biographers and commentators of the philosopher continues till now. Thus, H. Kuhn was one of the first philosophers in his time who cast doubt that it was possible to find a place for ethics and politics in the philosophy of symbolic forms. For Cassirer the life presents itself only as the history, not as "the life that is to be lived through" [24]. Objecting to the critics, the American researcher J. M. Crois writes that it is exactly what Cassirer does at the last point of his creative career: he transforms the philosophy of symbolic forms into the study, the central problem of which is the normative aspect of the idea of culture [25].

If you read "The Myth of the State" attentively and without bias, you can notice that the deep and professional analysis of the technique of political myths and the social organization of totalitarian mechanism of the government in Germany are not devoid of critical and moral assessment of the philosopher. His questioning — is it really possible to obtain an exemption from myth? — is a disturbing and purely philosophical question, which was firstly put by ethics of Plato. In my opinion, the motives of ethical and critical position of Cassirer are most completely presented in the book "The Myth of the State" [26]. Against the background of a wide view of the development of history of morals and mythical thinking, the philosopher reveals the transcendental history of moral consciousness and brings to light the radical shifts in the view of life of a European man that happened in the XX century, and that reverberate in a warning and alarming way till now.

IV. CONCLUSION

As we can see, the significance and value of Kantian understanding of the sphere of practical is specially underlined in critical ethics. It is exactly the point where ethical idealism observes the criterion for objectivity, which has the meaning of "unity and universality" in a practical sphere. The practice (*die Praxis*) which has will as its grounding is a kind of cognitive analogue of practical reflexion. The representatives of Neo-Kantian philosophy confirm this statement with the reflexive comprehension of dualism of "causality of being" and "causality of oughtness": Kantian dualism directs the understanding of the limits of causality, — causality of oughtness goes beyond the reality, it is referred to the empirically impossible, not the reality. Following Kant, H. Cohen and E. Cassirer consider that experience is forceless here, it cannot give the strong evidence of the pure meaning of "categorical imperative". The critical standpoint retains the peculiarity of the basic

transcendental view. Cohen's polemic with the ideas of ethical idealism of Fichte becomes an exactly visible demonstration of distinction between logic and ethics in the system of Kantian philosophy. Cohen adopts ethics as the methodological grounding of the liberal sciences, and thereby defines it as the theory of principles of legal and state philosophy. Criticism in Neo-Kantian ethics is a sort of demonstration of the symbolic and clear acknowledgement of Kant's "immeasurable merit". Kantian distinction between logic and ethics, between being and oughtness, is not only the instrument of critique of eudemonism in ethics, but also of a philosophical pantheism, naturalism and materialism.

E. Cassirer in his interpretation of Kantian ethics extends the boundaries of the theory of knowledge and gives it the transcendental character of the philosophy of culture. By means of comprehension of the significance of the cultural sciences, he places the question about the practical meaning of philosophical ethics, linking it directly with the fundamental meanings for culture — autonomous and free, individual personality. Critical reflection (*die Reflexion*) makes the understanding of what presents itself as the idea of freedom possible. And this turn to the critical philosophical ethics is being linked not with the analytical tradition, as it was considered, but with the beginning of that transcendental turn moment, the ideas of Neo-Kantian philosophy.

REFERENCES

- [1] V.N. Belov: *The System of Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism // Problems of Philosophy*. 2006. Vol. 4. pp. 144–150.
- [2] E. Cassirer: *Hermann Cohen and the Renewal of Kantian Philosophy // Kant Studies*, Vol. 17, Berlin, 1912, p. 254.
- [3] H. Cohen: *Kant's Foundations of Ethics*. 3 Ed. // H. Cohen: *Werke / ed. H. Holzhey*. Zürich, 2001. Vol. 2. in German
- [4] *Ibid.* P. 193.
- [5] V.N. Belov: *Ernst Cassirer. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms // Problems of Philosophy*. 2003. Vol. 12. pp. 177–178.
- [6] H. Holzhey: *The Neo-Kantianism // Philosophy in the 20th Century*. 2 vols. Hamburg: Rowohlt paperback publishing house, 1992. Vol. 1. pp. 35-37.
- [7] I. Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason* (2 ed. 1787) // *Academic Edition of Immanuel Kant's Collected Works in Volume 23*. Duisburg-Essen: Corpora-Uni. Vol. 3. p. 341.
- [8] P. Natorp: *Philosophy. Your problem and your problems. Introduction to critical idealism*. 2nd ed. Göttingen, 1918. p. 78.
- [9] H. Holzhey: *The Neo-Kantianism // Philosophy in the 20th Century*. 2 vols. Hamburg: Rowohlt paperback publishing house, 1992. Vol. 1. p. 36.
- [10] H. Cohen: *Ethics of Pure Will*. 2nd ed. Berlin, 1907.
- [11] H. Cohen: *On Kant's influence on German culture // A. Görland / E. Cassirer (ed.): Hermann Cohen's writings on philosophy and contemporary history*. 2 vols. Berlin, 1928, Vol. 1. pp. 368-370.
- [12] A. Poma: *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*. M.: Academic project, 2012. P. 150.
- [13] L.I. Tetyuev, S.A. Shilova: *World-understanding Nature of Language. The Problem of Language in E. Cassirer's Symbolic Idealism*. Saarbrücken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2011. pp. 143-145.
- [14] B. Recki: *Culture without morality? Why Ernst Cassirer could not write ethics despite his insight into the primacy of practical reason // Ernst Cassirer's work and effect: culture and philosophy*. Darmstadt: Scientific Book Society, 1997. pp. 58-78.

- [15] E.-W. Orth: The Concept of Cultural Philosophy by Ernst Cassirer // Culture. Provisions in the 20th century. Frankfurt/Main, 1990, P. 191.
- [16] E. Cassirer: Collected Works. Vol. 7: Freedom and form. Studies on German intellectual history. Hamburg, 2001. P. XVI.
- [17] E. Cassirer: Kant's Life and Thought. Berlin: Published by Bruno Cassirer, 1921. 449 p.
- [18] Ibid. P. 2.
- [19] Ibid. P. 247.
- [20] Ibid. P. 254.
- [21] Ibid. P. 259.
- [22] Ibid. P. 264.
- [23] Ibid. P. 265.
- [24] H. Kuhn: The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer // ed. P.A. Schlipp. Library of Living Philosophers. Vol. 6. 1949. Reprint. New York: Tudor Publishing. 1958. P. 74.
- [25] J.M. Krois: Ernst Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History. New Haven; London, 1987. pp. 6-7.
- [26] L.I. Tetyuev: E. Cassirer and Critical Ethics Kant: The Question about the Interpretation // RUDN Journal of Philosophy. 2018. vol. 22 (1). P. 72.