

# Reception of Neo-Kantian Philosophy in Russian Academic Circles: Alexander Vvedensky

Vladimir Dudyshkin

Department of Philosophy

Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration

Moscow, Russia

E-mail: vecy@mail.ru

**Abstract**—The article examines the process of perception (also including critical thinking) and interpretation of Neo-Kantian philosophy, especially of the Marburg school, by Russian academic philosophical circles in the late 19th – early 20th century. The study focuses on Russian thinker Alexander Vvedensky; for that reason the emphasis is placed, firstly, on a certain uniqueness of his philosophical constructions (namely, based on religious faith and moral duty); secondly, the article draws attention to the fact that the philosopher, at the same time, tended to be close to so-called “pure” scientific philosophy of criticism and dissociation from all sorts of mysticism and psychologism, which allows us to draw some analogies with the philosophical model developed by the head of the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism Hermann Cohen.

**Keywords**—*Criticism; Neo-Kantianism; university philosophy; philosophical tradition in Russia; Alexander Vvedensky; Hermann Cohen*

## I. INTRODUCTION

We recall that the university has been the main place of philosophical studies for a certain time, and it is difficult to find an alternative to it. In fact, completely independent (in one or another way independent from the university) thinkers can be indicated only with a few reservations, if we make considerable efforts to make search in our memory through a long list of personalities. The reason probably lies in the fact that universities historically have always concentrated (by virtue of their direct aim) around themselves the intellectual elite of society, which have been consciously choosing as their professional duty serving the high ideals of science, teaching, research interests.

The 13th century, when philosophical faculties emerged at the largest universities of Western Europe (Paris, Cambridge, Oxford and others), should be taken as a point of reference for the development of university philosophy. In spite of the fact that some of them were transformed from the faculties of arts, while others mostly continued to teach theology, original philosophical thought, clothed with a rationalistic idea, like a young sprout made its way through numerous difficulties and outlined its own space of existence and the perspective of development. This idea was aptly formulated by Vladimir Pustarnakov: “Although throughout the Middle Ages philosophy at universities was a servant of

theology, it was in the university academic community that new for their time philosophical ideas started forming” [1]. Thus, universities without doubt have always been the torches of science (in the broad sense of this word), and university philosophy has always defended its prerogative to be the center of philosophy, the source of philosophical discourse, articulating the current situation by fixing new research horizons and offering various methods of cognition.

The University of Marburg was not an exception in this respect. In 1876 the Department of Philosophy of this university was taken up by professor ordinaries Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) after the death of Friedrich Lange. His main scientific interests were connected with the consistent development of the philosophical system of Immanuel Kant, in particular — the use and further elaboration of the transcendental method in gnoseology. It was a success, for it was Hermann Cohen who later became the founder and head of the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism, whose influence is rightly considered the most significant in the philosophical tradition in Russia, unlike the Baden school of Neo-Kantianism.

In a word, Otto Liebman’s appeal “Back to Kant!” formulated in 1865 in his work “Kant and Epigones”, was, as is well known, not only heard, but received with deep and creative interest by the philosophical circles first in Germany and then in Russia. This was facilitated, as was precisely noted by Igor Narsky and Leonard Kalinnikov, by “common mindset of schools, trends and groups that were dominant in the bourgeois philosophy of that time and were close to Empiriocriticism...” [2].

Immanuel Kant’s philosophy and philosophizing “in the spirit of Kant” began to acquire new supporters quickly. Soon the “fashion” of Kantianism and Neo-Kantianism affected a large part of the Russian philosophically educated community. At the same time, as rightly noted by Russian researcher of the German and Russian Neo-Kantianism Vladimir Belov: “... the learning of the lessons of German teachers and colleagues proceeded, firstly, independently and in an original way, and, secondly, in different cultural, historical and, most importantly, philosophical conditions compared with Germany. The absence of a long and deep philosophical tradition, including the tradition of study of Kant’s transcendental philosophy, was one of the reasons

why any representative of Russian Neo-Kantianism could not be called a consistent representative of the Marburg or Baden school. We can say that interest in Kant and Neo-Kantianism emerged in Russia at the same time.” [3]

In other words, taking into consideration the fact that in Russia there was simply no significant experience in conceptualizing the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant and that philosophical interest of Russian thinkers was traditionally focused mainly on religious and spiritual issues, Liebman’s call could probably be reformulated as follows: “Forward to Kant!”, thus we are compelled to adapt it to the Russian reality.

As we know, the most consistent Neo-Kantians in Russia were such philosophers and public figures — including the representatives of university philosophy — as Alexander Vvedensky, Alexander Veideman, Dmitry Gavronsky, Sergey Hessen, Genrich Lanz, Ivan Lapshin, Sergey and Moisey Rubinstein, Vasily Seseman, Fyodor Stepun, Boris Focht, Boris Yakovenko and others. They saw the main task of Neo-Kantian philosophy in the propaedeutic influence on the formation of the Russian tradition of rational thinking. “Russian Neo-Kantians, writes Vladimir Belov, understood their philosophical creativity as a necessary preparatory stage of the development of the philosophical tradition in Russia and acted as true mediators between the European and the Russian philosophical thought and, more broadly, social science”[4]. The project, indeed, is very large scale and extremely ambitious in design. However, such was the specificity of self-identification of representatives of Russian Neo-Kantianism.

## II. ALEXANDER VVEDENSKY – A CONSISTENT KANTIAN PHILOSOPHER OR A FOUNDER OF RUSSIAN NEO-KANTIANISM

Alexander Ivanovich Vvedensky (1856-1925) was precisely such an outstanding Russian thinker who saw the aim of the Kant’s philosophy and Kantianism not only in the development of the Russian philosophical tradition, but also necessarily in the “education of minds” in the spirit of a critical approach to the subject of study.

We should emphasize that A. Vvedensky with full right can be named a true representative of what is called Russian university philosophy. The reasons are as follows. When A. Vvedensky studied philosophy, his tutor was Mikhail Vladislavlev (the first Russian translator of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason). That is why, perhaps, we should consider as a reference point in the formation of his scientific interest in critical philosophy his student years spent at the Imperial St. Petersburg University (1877-1881), where he transferred from the Physics and Mathematics Faculty of Moscow University. In 1888, A. Vvedensky completed his thesis for a master’s degree in philosophy; the influence of Kantianism is already obvious in the topic of the thesis: “The Experience of Building a Theory of Matter on the Principles of Critical Philosophy”. Since 1890 he chaired the department of philosophy at St. Petersburg University and was a professor of the university until the end of his life.

In addition, A.I. Vvedensky held the position of professor at a number of other educational institutions, as well as the

chairman and the irreplaceable leader of the St. Petersburg Philosophical Society, which was formed in 1897 with his active participation and assistance, and existed until 1917.

By the way, he comments on the call of Otto Liebman (considered as the “starting point” of the Neo-Kantian movement) in the following way, demonstrating his quite independent and creative interpretation: “In fact, it is recommended not just to return to Kant, but to adopt the principles of criticism created by him, in order to cleanse them of the impurities of dogmatism, and proceed even further than Kant, developing a purely critical philosophy” [5]. Thus, A. Vvedensky articulates the main idea of German Neo-Kantianism, namely, the development of philosophy “in the spirit” of Kant and the overcoming “narrow” places of Kant’s criticism; the thinker not only smooths contradictions and fills the gnoseological lacunae of Kantianism, but also builds up and develops independent philosophical concepts, which will be discussed below.

According to many Russian researchers, A. Vvedensky was the founder and the consistent supporter of Neo-Kantianism in Russia, although he was not a direct student of the scholars of Marburg or Baden Neo-Kantianism. Thus, V. Pustarnakov characterized A. Vvedensky as “the leader of Russian Neo-Kantianism of late 19th and early 20th centuries”, “a Neo-Kantian professor” [6]. Although at the same time, later in the text, the author somewhat changes his position and writes the following words: “At the end of the 80s of the 19th — up to the beginning of the 20th century Vvedensky was the leader of Russian Kantianism ...” [7]. By this comment, perhaps, the researcher emphasized the lack of desire to fundamentally determine the philosopher as a member of a particular “camp” and to initiate scholastic discussions in this direction.

Vladimir Belov makes the statement that “Vvedensky was the founder of Russian Neo-Kantianism”, among other things, the title of one of his articles, in which he consistently and convincingly proves his own position [8]. The author of this article also repeatedly emphasized his own point of view in his publications: “In the eyes of the researcher A.I. Vvedensky appears as a Neo-Kantian philosopher” [9].

In contrast to this position, another Russian researcher of German and Russian philosophy of Neo-Kantianism – Nina Dmitrieva—considers A. Vvedensky an unambiguous representative of Kantianism and suggests paying attention to the terminology, revealing the essence of the terms “Kantianist” and “Neo-Kantianist” more precisely. Also, despite the fact that many pages of print editions are devoted to this controversy, we will cite some excerpts from them: “A Neo-Kantianist, unlike the Kantianist, assumes that it is impossible to directly continue Kant’s thought. A Neo-Kantianist has no choice but to develop his own views “in the spirit of” Kant. Kant is historical for a Neo-Kantianist”, she notes. She also continues: “The Kantianists, on the contrary, followed in the ideological sense (and mostly in temporal one) directly after Kant and built their concepts from some of the “only true” positions in his philosophical system, so as to improve and supplement other parts of his

system that seemed to them insufficiently substantiated, internally contradictory, and therefore erroneous” [10].

Alexander Abramov has a similar approach, offering as the main criterion for such a classification “following the philosophical principles of one of the main German schools of Neo-Kantianism (Baden or Marburg)”; and also adds that “with such a specification many [...] Russian Neo-Kantianists can be considered simply Kantianists, i.e., followers and successors of Kant’s philosophy” [11].

Naturally, Alexander Abramov and Nina Dmitrieva present very strong arguments. However, we should not ignore the fact that Hermann Cohen and Alexander Vvedensky did not differ fundamentally in terms of understanding the aims of philosophy: “They both, writes V. Belov, believe this aim to be the substantiation of the possibility of scientific cognition and in the substantiation of the scientific nature of philosophy itself ...” [12], this constitutes a kind of ideological and methodological similarity. Also, we need to recall that “firstly, almost all the Russian philosophers who are considered to be undoubtedly Neo-Kantianists by the philosophical community (Boris Yakovenko, Vasily Seseman, Fyodor Stepun, Sergey Hessen), so independently and creatively followed their German teachers, that it is just impossible and incorrect to call them representatives of one of the main schools of Neo-Kantianism. Secondly, in German Neo-Kantianism itself, the diversity of schools and trends was not limited to two main ones. And finally, the attitude even of these basic German schools to the heritage and principles of Kant’s philosophy is so different within themselves that it is extremely difficult to talk about any strict substantive criteria” [13].

### III. THE CONCEPTUAL GROUNDS OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEM OF ALEXANDER VVEDENSKY

We should emphasize that A. Vvedensky not only lined up, and then developed theoretical constructs from various (insufficiently substantiated) Kantian position, but was engaged in creative activity, elaborating a systematic conceptual core of his own teaching. One of these concepts should be considered Vvedensky’s “logicism”, which was introduced for the first time in the philosopher’s main work “Logic as a Part of the Theory of Cognition”. The thinker needed the concept of logicism to further substantiate the truthfulness of Kant’s criticism. The philosopher himself commented on this topic: “...only at the end of printing, I noticed that from those additions a new proof of the impossibility of metaphysical knowledge, completely independent from criticism (of course, logically, not genetically independent) could be developed” [14]. His logicism actualizes and strengthens the role of logic in the theory of cognition, although it does not completely exclude the partial presence of the non-rational gnoseological aspect – religious faith and moral duty.

Logic as a scientific discipline is regarded by A. Vvedensky as a very serious tool, providing reliable criteria for differentiating between knowledge and faith, truthfulness and falsity of judgment: “Logic is so important for philosophy that, we can say, one should not engage in

philosophy without a thorough knowledge of logic: without it, one can only learn to effectively talk and speculate on different philosophical questions, but it is impossible to understand them in all their depth”, the philosopher believed [15].

It is with the help of logic and, respectively, of “logicism” that the philosopher tries to prove the impossibility of metaphysical knowledge, knowledge that pretends to be such, but that has emerged from the field of faith. At the same time, perhaps without noticing it, A. Vvedensky reveals a sort of dualism in the very wording of the question: on the one hand, he stands for drawing a strict demarcation line between knowledge and faith, clearly distinguishing between them; on the other hand, he discusses cognitive possibilities in the field of metaphysics, thereby recognizing Kant’s transcendental “things in themselves”.

Moreover, in his discourse on the category of “metaphysics” the philosopher comes to the conclusion that “metaphysics is the doctrine of true being, i.e., about being, conceivable as it exists by itself, regardless of how it is recognized by us, or how it appears to us as existing” [16]. Thus, a certain abstract true being is opposed by A. Vvedensky to the real or apparent one, i.e. to such a being that we see, that we perceive every day and imagine as it appears to us to exist.

On the whole, Alexander Vvedensky recognizes that human has an inalienable need to ask questions traditionally related to the field of metaphysics: about the existence of God, freedom of will, immortality of soul, etc. He considers such questions to be immanently inherent in inquisitive human cognition and facilitating filling of certain lacunae in the formation of a holistic world view. In this regard, he writes: “We do not know anything about true being and cannot know anything else except this impossibility of knowing about it and also except the fact that in the form of faith, one can safely, without any fear of being refuted by knowledge, preach about the true being (otherwise about “things-in-themselves”, about noumena) everything we would like to” [17]. In other words, metaphysics in the form of knowledge is impossible, but in the form of an irrefutable faith it is not only permissible, but in some cases is even quite desirable.

Indeed, even when developing the provisions of natural science, we will inevitably be able to find in their composition metaphysical assumptions and various kinds of conventions, but only those that, for example, are conventionally accepted in the scientific community and are systemically important within the existing paradigm. But Alexander Vvedensky suggested including in the system of knowledge such metaphysical provisions that are required by the moral considerations that we profess, eliminating the existing contradictions in the holistically-formed worldview. N. Dmitrieva rightly notes that “it turns out that the task of philosophy includes not only the development of the theory of cognition but also the development of metaphysics” [18]. In short, metaphysics, although in the form of faith and moral duty, is postulated by the philosopher as an invariant component of the theory of cognition.

Another concept of A. Vvedensky is his “psycho-physiological law”. Its essence lies in the fact that the philosopher asserts and justifies the impossibility of finding the objective signs of someone else’s animation (or of the soul, as some source of psychic experiences of the “other I”) only by the natural science method. Thus, according to the philosopher, we can easily recognize and admit only our own animation. But since this point of view leads to the postulation of certainty only of our own individual consciousness, we also reserve for ourselves and for any other subject the implicit right (in the form of moral duty, of course) to recognize the presence of a soul in the “other I”. And it is easy to understand, because the search in the field where it was initiated by A. Vvedensky, goes beyond knowledge and dwells in the field of metaphysics. At the time there were many opponents of this provision, trying to substantiate the opposite: Lev Lopatin, Ernest Radlov, Prince Sergey Trubetskoy and others. However, the attempts did not bring tangible results and the allegation as a whole remained unrefuted.

Indeed, various objectively observable mental reactions in any living organism can be explained by purely physiological reasons, without possible references and remarks concerning its animate or inanimate nature. A. Vvedensky subsequently boasted of the fact that this general philosophical position was after a while substantiated by the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov in more specific scientific terms. The philosopher reasonably believed that are not only unable to observe the psychic processes taking place in the “other I”, but even are not always able to imagine them as alien processes. Instead, we model our own spiritual life in the conditions of the “other I”, i.e. mentally substitute another person by ourselves. “And in this case it means that whenever I observe (or rather assume that I observe) apsyche phenomenon in other person’s mind, in fact, I only build it in my mind; and, of course, build it from those very elements that make up my own psychic life (for I cannot imagine any other elements), so, I transfer them from myself to another person”, the philosopher wrote [19].

Therefore, if we cannot prove the existence of someone else’s spiritual life empirically, and at the same time we intuitively accept this as an undeniable truth, then it appears that this truth, although it has a metaphysical character, is necessary for us due to moral reasons. Moreover, such truths, according to A. Vvedensky, are also perceived by a certain “special organ” with very specific competences: “The existence of a special organ of cognition, especially of such cognition that has a metaphysical character is a conclusion that is logically inevitable for anyone who admits the law of absence of objective signs of animation and at the same time considers that animation of other people is an indisputable truth” [20]. In other words, the philosopher gives to faith a very wide space for maneuvers in gnoseology, which, however, should not interfere with the scientific nature of cognition.

However, in fact, it is sometimes difficult to get rid of the thought precisely expressed by Nina Dmitrieva: “Speaking of religious feeling as a feeling of “presence” or “closeness” of God, Vvedensky for a moment abandons the line of

German criticism for the sake of the tradition of Russian religious mysticism...” [21]. So Alexander Vvedensky himself gives some grounds for the emergence of research skepticism regarding his philosophical position. Although at the same time the thinker is trying by all means to distance himself from mysticism, as his critical essay “On Mysticism and Criticism in Vladimir Solovyov’s Theory of Cognition”<sup>1</sup> reveals. In this essay the philosopher himself tries to avoid the “slippery ground” of mysticism. “It is a difficult task to speak about mysticism as a phenomenon in scientific and critical language, without resorting to mysticism, but Vvedensky manages to do it brilliantly, at the first glance. He introduces the definition of mysticism, which means “confidence in the existence of mystical perception”, as well as the definition of mystical perception...” Nina Dmitrieva notes [22].

Completing the attempt to reconstruct A. Vvedensky’s philosophical system it is also necessary to highlight his antipsychologistic attitudes. So, the need to “clean up” the theory of cognition from its psychologistic interpretation and to raise the question about distinguishing psychology from logic and philosophy in general was evident to the philosopher, since in the context of the academic university process, they were closely interrelated and taught within the framework of philosophical discipline. The issue of delimitation of these subjects was really relevant in the late 19th– early 20th century due to the fact that they only started forming as completely independent scientific disciplines.

Alexander Vvedensky obviously understood that although logic studies the laws of thinking, nevertheless, is not based on psychology at all. The philosopher confirmed the independence of logic from psychology by the fact that all sciences in one way or another rely on any psychological features of the cognizing subject, although at the same time these scientific disciplines are completely independent. “The logic, constructed in accordance with something or based on something except itself, can only be a distortion of any logic, an illogical logic”, Vvedensky stated [23].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To draw a conclusion, the specifics of Russian Neo-Kantianism of the late 19th — early 20th centuries and its reception in the university environment, with the example of Alexander Vvedensky, consists in the fact that the thinker offered an original philosophical system based on the principles of critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. However, it experienced a considerable influence of both German idealistic and Russian religious and spiritual traditions of philosophizing. In this regard Vladimir Belov explains: “But the most similar features of this system can be found with the Neo-Kantianism of the Marburg school founder, Cohen. We can point out logicism and methodologism in the development of Kantian theoretical philosophy, and the expansion of practical cognition limits beyond the framework of scientific knowledge, and the inclusion in it of

<sup>1</sup> See: A.I. Vvedensky, *On Mysticism and Criticism in Vladimir Solovyov’s Theory of Cognition // Philosophical essays*. Edition 1. – Saint-Petersburg: “V.S. Balashev and Co” Printing House, 1901. P. 39-68.

national philosophical specification (Jewish for Cohen, Russian for Vvedensky), not to mention the similar interpretation of Kantian thing-in-itself as a limit of permissibility of scientific cognition, understanding of cognition as a holistic phenomenon and at the same time an infinite process"[24].

Being one of the first Russian university philosophers who consistently developed Kantian criticism, Alexander Vvedensky without any doubt made a very significant contribution to the enrichment of the Russian tradition of philosophizing with critical "motives". "The work of Vvedensky as a scientist, pedagogue and educator, who in every possible way contributed to spreading and strengthening philosophical criticism in Russia, played a significant role in the formation of the Russian philosophical tradition and one of its trends — Russian Neo-Kantianism in the last third of the 19th — early 20th centuries"[25]. With the considerable contribution of Vvedensky the interest of "St. Petersburg Neo-Kantian youth" towards Neo-Kantian movement itself was aroused, the best evidence of which is the fact of mass "pilgrimage" of Russian students interested in philosophy to German university cities (it is well known, that Marburg was especially popular among them). An increased interest in Neo-Kantianism also manifested itself in another important event — the establishing in Russia of the international journal on the philosophy of culture "Logos", which was created to promote and develop the philosophical ideas of Neo-Kantianism (A. Vvedensky sometimes participated in the editorial activities of the journal). Although it was not generally possible to sustain and preserve the purity of the Neo-Kantian orientation, we should note the great creative activity of its editors and numerous authors, most of whom became very enthusiastic in the Neo-Kantian debate.

Therefore, considering the widespread interest, that used to exist in that period in this area of philosophical thought, we still have some reasons to hope that this "philosophy captured in flight" will still be able to actualize scientific research in the international philosophical community within its own subject matter. And such intentions in research interests are already revealing themselves on the pages of printed publications.

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