

Object, System, and Culture: The Marburg Neo-Kantian Reception of Kant

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This paper argues that the Neo-Kantian reception of Kant's concept of the object – particularly within the Marburg School – culminates in Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as the legitimate completion of the critical project. It traces this development by showing how Hermann Cohen's focus on the infinitesimal (dx) as an isolated unit of thought, together with Paul Natorp's shift towards relational synthesis (dx/dy) within a systematic framework, paved the way for Cassirer's decisive expansion. For Cassirer, the object is constituted within dynamic systems of meaning that extend beyond the exact sciences to encompass the full spectrum of cultural forms, including myth, language, and art. Thus, the article demonstrates how Cassirer transforms Kant's *critique of reason* into a *critique of culture*. This reconciles the interpretations of Marburg Neo-Kantianism put forth by Cohen and Natorp within this broader framework.

Keywords: transcendental philosophy – object – system – science – critique of culture – Kant – Marburg Neo-Kantianism

I. Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the twentieth-century interpretations of Kant's project by Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, and Ernst Cassirer, focusing on the concept of the mathematical object developed by the Marburg group. For these thinkers, the object is understood as a representation whose value depends on its position within a system. While Kant's general conception of the object is preserved by the authors, it is progressively reshaped through the specific theoretical developments of Marburg Neo-Kantianism. Cohen

considers the representation of the object in terms of the differential dx , conceived as an isolated unit endowed with its own meaning. In contrast, Natorp emphasizes the constructive value of the object, arguing that its value is determined not by an isolated unit but by relations (functions) – specifically, by dx/dy rather than dx alone. This contribution is indispensable for Cassirer's symbolic philosophy, as it is the concept of function through which the value of the content of the mathematical object is determined, which he will later apply to cultural concepts.

II. Substance and Function. Interpretive Differences in (Neo)Kantianism

The concept of the object in Kant's *Critique* refers to three key aspects: 1) the notion of a general object thought of as something in general = X; 2) the formal unity of consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of representations; and 3) any synthetic unity that occurs under a "unity of the rule" that justifies the reproduction and unity of intuition (*KrV*, A105). For Kant, this conception is articulated on two complementary levels. On the one hand, sensibility provides the raw material: phenomena are given in intuition as representations that refer to an inaccessible-in-itself "transcendental object = X" (*KrV*, A109). On the other hand, understanding provides the necessary form for knowledge, ordering the given through the categories (Azeri 2010, 274 – 276).

Pollock (2017) points out that objectivity is constituted in and by judgment, which presupposes the "original-synthetic unity of apperception" as its logical foundation. This unity "is a logical (rather than a psychological) concept...what makes this unity logical is the absence of any empirical characteristic or index – spatio-temporal, or even human" (Pollock 2017, 63). It is precisely this logical unity of apperception that, by making synthetic judgments possible, allows for the application of the categories and confers upon our representations an objective reference. Ultimately, as Kant concludes, it is the pure concept of the transcendental object which, through this process, "gives all our empirical concepts a relation to an object, that is, objective reality" (*KrV*, A109).

For Marburg Neo-Kantianism, the true act of judgment must be sought through the historical advances offered by the exact sciences (Musioł 2024). By studying the *Critique* from the sciences, this group focuses on the logical functions that define the act of knowledge; thus, physics and mathematics become the primary model for the Kantian interpretation. However, gradually science will be considered as a resource that must be expanded for the

development of a critique of culture (Luft 2015). We now proceed to review this progressive advance.

Cohen's work (1883) studies the foundations of the knowledge of reality by posing as a problem the method by which modern mathematics and physics became possible. To do this, he investigates how scientific knowledge was constituted, based on the idea that the "object" is that reality constituted by the subject solely within the framework of scientific inquiries. Thus, in order to verify this, a historical review of the development of science became necessary, as well as the study of the scientific conditions under which knowledge is possible. Therefore, knowledge – rather than being founded through a synthesis between sensibility and understanding as Kant proposed (*KrV*, B29 – 30) – is a product of pure thought which is expressed in mathematics and its axioms. For Cohen, the study of knowledge develops as a logical analysis of already constituted scientific knowledge (such as that offered by infinitesimal calculus), understood as an autonomous production of pure thought.

According to the generally accepted Kantian doctrine, intuition is a source of cognition, equal with thinking; therefore, thinking is no less a source of knowledge. For every objective knowledge, the two sources of knowledge must unite; each particular knowledge is conditioned by this conjunction of both means of knowledge. Knowledge of objective scope can be achieved neither through intuition alone nor through thinking alone. But in this methodological proposition, it is at the same time clearly expressed that intuition and thinking are not themselves objects of knowledge, but merely epistemological abstractions.

The value of these abstractions evidently lies in the purity of their determination and treatment. The abstraction of intuition is all the more scientific, rigorous, and thus more powerful in its relations, the more distinctly its characteristics can be distinguished and kept separate from those of thinking. The same requirement applies to the abstraction of thinking: that it should not be mixed or contaminated with any elements of intuition. For if indeed the aforementioned abstractions are the necessary and sufficient formal conditions of all knowledge, then the concept of abstraction demands that each be independently determined within itself (Cohen 1883, 15 – 16, my translation).

Cohen emphasizes that knowledge is a product exclusively of understanding, and not a synthesis of it with sensibility. His interest is to highlight that, although intuition provides the empirical elements, the authentic act of ordering and constituting the object occurs in the categories of thought. The author

emphasizes the independence and primacy of understanding over the role of sensibility in the construction of objects understood as substances; for him, mathematical concepts would be objects of pure understanding through which the determination of phenomena as substances that are classified as scientific objects is possible (Esparza 2025, 68 – 107).

As part of his arguments, Cohen offers a historical review of modern science, whose main goal is to base substances as differential units (dx):

Once the real meaning of the differential has been recognized, the question of whether dx itself is continuous or discrete cannot present any serious difficulty. It is discrete within the order of differentiation undertaken for the purpose of a given realization. For only by an assumed discretion can the continuum – that is to say, a function corresponding to the law of continuity – be measured and determined (Cohen 1883, 75, my translation).

According to Hernán Pringe (2017), these ideas are both the core of the originality of Cohen's thought and its greatest controversy, for his interpretation regarding the role and possibilities of calculus to express reality as the integration of an isolated moment within an infinite totality fails in its insistence on isolating dx (the pure instant) instead of emphasizing its role within the function dx/dy . It is only within the framework of the relation that dx has with a function dy that the unit acquires meaning. Giovanelli (2016) describes the criticisms received against Cohen's stance, and the continuous efforts of Natorp and Cassirer to support their colleague's ideas, even though they themselves recognized that the isolated expression dx does not constitute a valid mathematical expression.

Klaus Christian Köhnke (1991, 179 – 189) identifies a fundamental error in Cohen's Kantian interpretation: confusing the transcendental possibility of experience with the historical facticity of science. According to Köhnke, Cohen claims that the constitution of objects in physics and mathematics is made possible directly by the scientific axioms upon which these disciplines are based. In other words, Cohen would take the fact principles of the sciences of his time as if they were the a priori and constitutive principles that Kant sought. Köhnke argues that this identification is untenable for two main reasons. First, despite operating with general laws, the natural sciences are not forms of "pure" knowledge in the Kantian sense, since their ultimate validity depends on a connection with phenomena and on experimental verification. Their axioms are not purely a priori; rather, they are hypotheses that require confirmation through experience. Second, although mathematics can indeed

validate its axioms without recourse to the empirical, taking it as the sole model for a priori knowledge betrays Kant's critical project. Köhnke warns that this interpretation misapplies the Kantian principle that: "we know a priori of things only what we ourselves have put into them" (*KrV*, Bxviii). For Köhnke, Cohen applies this theorem naively, equating the logical-mathematical construction of the scientific object with the transcendental constitution of the object of possible experience, thereby overlooking the critical dimension and the limits that Kant established (Axinn 2013).

Sebastian Luft likewise identifies this error in Cohen, but he also emphasizes how, paradoxically, a new philosophical project emerges from it. By identifying factual science as the very form of the condition of experience, Cohen proposes a radical program: to interpret all possible objects of knowledge based on this general form. This program thus becomes "a critique of the factual development of the sciences by scrutinizing the rational elements guiding it" (Luft 2015, 70).

Natorp, in this regard, argues that greater attention must be paid to the relation mediating between both elements to determine the role each fulfills, and whether it is necessary to determine a position or order of importance. This author presents mathematical objects as the result of an intellectual synthesis in which the intuited phenomena are incorporated into a logical system in which the framework of meaning for the determination of objects is defined; specifically, he proposes that the object must be understood as the product of a synthesis:

Kant seems to deviate from [the understanding of logical nature of mathematics] when he introduces a non-logical factor in "pure intuition," which he claims is involved in the foundation of mathematics. But as "pure" intuition, it again approaches the logical very closely and unites with it in a close bond; indeed, at the height of the Kantian system, it seems to dissolve entirely back into the logical, as the "synthesis," which initially was meant to characterize the distinguishing feature of "intuition," becomes precisely the fundamental function of thought...But initially, it was demanded by the very principle of Kant's transcendental philosophy that what in Kant was, at the very least misleadingly, decomposed into the two factors of pure intuition and pure thought, should be taken back together into a strict unity and understood as a single entity, for which one can unhesitatingly retain the name "pure thought" (Natorp 1910, 1 – 2, my translation).

Natorp proposes a primacy of thought over intuition, arguing that through the act of receiving phenomena it is not possible to postulate an order or any relation that allows them to be defined as units of a series. Instead, his stance leads to assuming that there is no apprehension of phenomena that can be understood as isolated knowledge, nor an understanding that by itself can be postulated as an object on its own; instead, he will propose to study the conditions under which it is possible to incorporate phenomena within a system to assume them as a series object:

Reality itself, givenness, is a determination of thought, and ultimately an achievement of pure thinking. But it is not yet this (which is the concern of modality) that is in question here, but rather the methodological preconditions for it, which have not yet been established... Thus, no longer in a simple synthesis, but in a new *synthesis of syntheses*, or a synthetic unity of synthetic unities... Kant now uses the term *relation* for this new direction of thought-determination. But he evidently understands this as a *relation of relations*, a *synthesis of syntheses* (Natorp 1910, 66, my translation).

Paul Natorp's conception of knowledge radically departs from Hermann Cohen's by framing knowledge not as a static logical foundation, but as a continuous process of synthesis within open systems. For Natorp, every cognitive synthesis occurs: 1) as the result of an iteration of prior syntheses, 2) within a series or system, and 3) under a general law that defines the order of each element within the system (Natorp, 1910, 69 – 70). This implies that knowledge is inherently systemic and prospective: the validity of any new content must be evaluated in relation to prior systems of thought, while simultaneously requiring the continuous construction of a general system that guides the validity of future ones.

As Sebastian Luft points out, this approach represents a radical transformation of the Marburg method. Natorp inherits from Cohen the search for the a priori in cultural facts, but shifts the focus from the *factum* (the accomplished fact of science) to the *fieri* (the very process of its production). Philosophy, therefore, must "immerse itself in the flow of cultural production" to grasp the living principles that guide it (Luft 2015, 105 – 107). This is the basis of his proposal of plural "logics" for the different spheres of culture.

The crucial consequence of this shift is a redefinition of the object and of experience. For Natorp, the general requirement of knowledge is to construct the object through the critical evaluation of new elements to integrate them into a logical unity. In this framework, relation or function becomes the fundamental

category of thought, as they describe the dynamic process by which any phenomenon is taken up as an object. Thus, a decisive inversion takes place with respect to Kant: whereas in the *Critique*, intuition provides the understanding with a sensible datum to be subsumed under the categories (*KrV*, B148 – 150), in Natorp's philosophy sensible reception is from the outset subordinated to the critical evaluation of what is received, in order to determine its value and its place within the logical system under construction.

For Natorp the foundation of the object is the logical unity between sensibility and understanding, and only to the extent that a synthesis and incorporation of what is received occurs within a system, can that synthesis be understood as an object of knowledge. The validity of knowledge depends on the assessment of the object in relation to a scientific model that allows the determination of a synthesis as an element that can be incorporated into a system (Esparza 2025, 108 – 129).

For Cassirer, the formation of objects occurs when intuition receives empirical evidence, since it is through this act that the categories of the understanding structure and interpret what is perceived. This act is presented as "symbolic pregnance" because for the author the determination of meaning occurs from the act of perception, such that what is received is no longer a perception given through intuition and subsequently interpreted through categories, but now the world is understood as spiritual expressions that reveal a modality of content depending on the intellectual context in which they are perceived (Axinn 2013; Endres 2016, 2020, 2022):

What is first given – Kant explains – is appearance, which, when it is connected with consciousness, is called perception; this is because without the relationship to an at least possible consciousness, appearance could never become for us an object of cognition" (Cassirer 2020c, 229; *KrV*, A120).

For Cassirer, Hertz's (1894) *The Principle of Mechanics* provides the model through which the new "concept of object" should be understood. This German physicist recognizes that properly physical qualities (in their scientific sense) are not properties contained in the material reality of phenomena, but rather the possibility of configuring the laws that describe and define them is the result of the unity between empirical reality and the formulation of a framework of comprehension that allows their scientific description. With this, the value of the experiment no longer points only to the evaluation of the past (the scientific description of the phenomenon), but also offered the

predictability of future actions and, above all, the correction of scientific content in light of its potential practical utility.

For Cassirer (2020a, 4 – 5), however, the focus is on the definition offered by Hertz at the opening of his work:

We form for ourselves images or symbols of external objects; and the form which we give them is such that the necessary consequences of the images in thought are always the images of the necessary consequences in nature of the things pictured. In order that this requirement may be satisfied, there must be certain conformity between nature and our thought. Experience teaches us that the requirement can be satisfied, and hence that such a conformity does in fact exist (Hertz 1894, 1).

The most important consequence highlighted by Cassirer from this passage by Hertz is the new concept of “image” proposed here, for the represented objects are now understood as symbols of the relation between intellectually and naturally necessary consequences, by virtue of a harmony between mind and nature (Maco 2010). This leads Cassirer to postulate that it is within the framework of the system of physical science and its model of knowledge construction that the sciences build their models of comprehension of worldly objects, thereby positing that nature (reality) is known in the interrelation of the “natural-scientific theory of cognition” (Cassirer 2020a, 4).

With this direction set by Hertz, Cassirer argues that each science must recognize that natural reality cannot be studied apart from the very categories through which each science approaches its own objects (matter in physics, life in biology, changes in chemistry, etc.), introducing a new problem: upon recognizing that the object is constituted as the product of the intellectual consequences that each discipline implements to study nature, then how is the unity of the particular objects derived from each science possible? (Esparza 2025, 68 – 107). The resolution of this question constitutes a new task “for the philosophical critique of cognition. It must follow and survey as a whole the path taken by the individual trends of the particular sciences” (Cassirer 2020a, 6; Maco 2010).

In this way, for the author, the relationship between sensibility and understanding in the constitution of knowledge encounters the new perspective that such synthesis does not occur as an isolated fact from the scientific forms that develop it, but rather it is within the framework of the sciences that the scientific contents developed within culture take shape and meaning. Thus, the author proposes to maintain the primacy of the understanding postulated by

Cohen, but at the same time proposes that the configuration of symbols occurs as the result of the logical unity between sensibility and scientific understanding postulated by Natorp. The main difference is the re-situation of Kant's critical project to promote a critique of culture (Ikonen 2011; Verene 2013; Luft 2021; Lassègue 2020; Truwant 2022). As can be seen, for Cassirer the concept of object is no longer understood solely as the product of a representation of the sensible or the interpretation of intuitions through categories, as Kant proposed. On the contrary, objects are conceived as the product of a logical synthesis of the data of intuition and their full incorporation within a scientific framework (Axinn 2013).

The differences between the Marburg representatives manifest themselves in their emphasis on the role of science as an absolute model, ranging from exalting the role of the understanding over that of sensibility (Cohen), through postulating the logical unity of both poles within the framework of the natural sciences (Natorp), to arriving at the functional comprehension of the sensible and the understanding as symbols proposed by the sciences (Ferrari 2015; Musiol 2024). However, this latter consideration, as discussed in the following section, entails an expansion that accepts non-scientific modalities of configuration as valid frameworks of meaning for the formation of cultural objects.

III. System as Interpretive Unity in Marburg Neo-Kantianism

The previous section showed the interpretive difference of the concept of object in Kant among the representatives of Marburg Neo-Kantianism. However, despite the interpretive distance on particular topics among the members of the Marburg School (Giovanelli, 2016), this section examines how the general projects of these authors reinterpret Kant's Critiques. This idea of unity is driven by Cassirer, who proposes a general evaluation of the work of his teachers to show the harmonious unity of each of his predecessors' systems.

For Cassirer (2001), Cohen's *System der Philosophie*, and particularly the *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, sets out the principles that constitute the object of knowledge; its main manifestation being mathematical objects from which the principles of the understanding are deduced. This proposal is complemented by the second volume – *Ethik des reinen Willens* – where the will is studied through a science like jurisprudence; the goal is to define the form of universal morality. The third volume – *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* – explains how it is possible for art to be a cultural fact of universal validity. Finally, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, published posthumously,

completes his system; in it, he maintains that Judaism is the cultural expression that demonstrates the experience of a “religion of ethical reason,” as he finds in historical Jewish texts a foundation for its practice and development.

According to Scott Edgar (2021), the first volumes are consistent with each other, but the volume dedicated to religion is a point of conflict as it makes a division between religious and philosophical thought. Cassirer (2001) had noted this apparent disparity, but instead, he presents it as a system whose unity proposes the harmony of opposites, and on the other hand, as the recognition that it is not only science that determines the nature of knowledge, but that other modalities can be included in the system. In this way, the supposed division between reason and religion, instead of being understood as conflicting dualities, had to be understood as an expression of cultural relations, for although each aspect of it could be interpreted as the positioning of an opposite manifested a particular and necessary task within a system in constant interaction between diverse stances.

Cassirer (2020c) maintains this interpretive turn when studying Natorp’s work, from whom he extracts his concept of “system.” The main result is an understanding of the system as a totality through which the constitution and development of the categories of understanding can be evaluated. In this way, unity could be understood no longer as a rigid set of categories that determine the form of understanding, but rather as a form that progresses and advances, accepting new modalities of knowledge configuration. Therefore, for Cassirer, Natorpian philosophy developed a system that not only presented itself as a resource for the evaluation of categories, but also included new forms of understanding, thereby turning the system itself into a dynamic resource that favored the permanent acceptance of new resources:

For [Natorp], the law represents the common generic term for every objectification in general – regardless of the form or stage to which it may belong. Thus, he not only stresses that in the cognizing of nature that every individual must be referred to the universal of law and taken and that the individual is taken only as an ‘instance’ of the law and valued as such but also stresses that the same mode of determination applies also to all ethical and aesthetic consideration. Ethical cognition and aesthetic cognition also seek the law, even if they seek it only in and for the individual, and precisely only insofar as they achieved it did they achieve, in any case, the objective validity that is striven for. Thus, for Natorp, not only logic but also ethics and furthermore even aesthetics and the philosophy of religion belong to the sphere of the “sciences of law,” and all of them, accordingly, are objectifying

in the same sense, in fact in a still more radical sense, the concrete sciences of objects (Cassirer 2020, 63 – 64).

Following Natorp, the new critical task would seek to expand the critique of culture that would not contradict Kant's proposal, but rather including non-scientific forms as valid expressions, without renouncing the original Kantian idea:

reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own... [it] must approach nature in order to be taught by it, but [in the capacity] of an appointed judge who compels the witnesses to answer the questions which he puts to them (*KrV*, Bxiii).

This project of investigation and search – which does not renounce understanding the laws governing empirical objects but rather posits laws that describe and comprehend them – is fully developed in *Analytic of the Understanding*:

the world of perception, far from being a mere formless mass of impressions, already includes within itself certain basic and originary-forms of "synthesis." [It is in the *Analytic* where] the unity between [sensibility and understanding] is no longer sought in an unknown ground of things; rather, it is, as it were, sought in the heart of cognition itself (Cassirer 2020c, 9).

This is the main goal of *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen*: to demonstrate that the very act of intuition already entails a modality of understanding (Cassirer 2020b; Javorčková 2025), but not by virtue of the matter received itself, but because in the form of apprehension and ordering, a cultural modality is imposed that assigns a position to each phenomenon: "Long before the world is given to consciousness as a totality of empirical 'things' and a complex of empirical 'properties,' it is given as a totality of mythical forces and effects" (Cassirer 2020b, 1 – 2). Therefore, the task of a critique of culture is not to distinguish the form of intuition and the discrimination of its content through categories, but rather the ordering of the perceived as the individual expression of a culture (Lassègue 2020, 109 – 120). In this sense, Cassirer's philosophical project is described by himself as:

attempt to assign to each one, as it were, its own specific and distinctive index of refraction. It aspires to know the particular nature of the various refracting media, to understand each one according to its constitution and the laws of its structure (Cassirer 2020c, 12).

Cassirer's project, like Cohen's, is a model that accentuates the forms of the understanding, but placing them within the processes of cultural formation. Likewise, it accepts Natorp's approach to cultural unity as a dynamic logical unity in which expressions fulfill a function within the system. For Cassirer, the comprehension of culture as a system was the full realization of Kant's critical project, as it strove to understand the nature of knowledge, recognizing that the objects of culture are not constituted as the synthesis of intuition and fixed, delimited categories, but rather the constant interaction of human beings with culture, recognizing the richness and differences of other non-scientific forms such as myth, language, technique, art, or history (Truwant 2022, 45 – 61; Javorčková 2025).

Thus, Cassirer's work has two goals: to reconcile the critical project of Kant with its subsequent reinterpretation by Cohen and Natorp, and to reconcile Kant and his Marburg interpreters. Expanding the critique of reason into a critique of culture demonstrates an interest in justifying the relationship between understanding and sensibility (Staicu 2025).

Conclusions

This article has examined the relationship between Kant's concept of the object in *Critique of Pure Reason* and its reinterpretation within the Marburg School. Adopting Kant's idea of the object as representation, Cohen, Natorp, and Cassirer understand representation as the assignment of a position within a system. However, their accounts diverge significantly in how this position confers meaning.

For Cohen, the object is defined as a differential dx , whose value derives from its position within a system and from which its individual meaning can be deduced. By contrast, Natorp rejects the primacy of isolated units and locates meaning in the system as a whole: the value of the unit lies not in its position but on its integration into a totality that assigns significance to its members. Cassirer develops this relational approach further by treating the differential not as a substantial unit but as a function (dx/dy) within a system of relations, thereby shifting the focus from substantial reality to functional meaning.

Thus, Cassirer extends the functional conception of representation beyond scientific systems to culture as a whole. His magnum opus constitutes both a revision and an expansion of Kant's critical project, reconciling the divergent interpretations of Cohen and Natorp. For Cassirer, the true meaning of Marburg Neo-Kantianism must be understood as the full fulfillment of the *Critique*, which studied the conditions that made knowledge possible. By

transforming the critique of reason into a critique of culture, Cassirer argues that only within the totality of cultural forms can the conditions governing the relationship between understanding and sensibility be fully grasped.

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