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The certainty of knowledge and logical normativity: The reconstruction of Windelband's transcendentalism

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Abstract

This paper examines Wilhelm Windelband's *On the Certainty of Knowledge* as a response to the epistemological crisis of philosophy in the age of scientism. Windelband argues that philosophy's task is not to produce knowledge but to justify its certainty. Rejecting both psychological and ethical forms of conviction, he grounds objective certainty in the transcendental normativity of logic. Logical law, as "a norm given to thought" (eine dem Denken gegebene Norm), prescribes how we ought to think and thereby provides the universal standard of truth. To reconcile logical form and empirical content, Windelband introduces the principles of causality (Kausalgesetz) and givenness (Gegebenheit), defining knowledge as a unity of subject and object under these norms. Ultimately, he maintains that we know not because we possess reality but because we are bound to represent it in a necessary form. By returning to Kant, Windelband restores philosophy's critical and normative authority against the dominance of scientism.

Keywords: Wilhelm Windelband, certainty of knowledge, transcendental logic, logical normativity, neo-Kantianism

1. Introduction

1.1 From the Crisis of Knowledge to the Problem of Certainty

From the Greek pursuit of *epistēmē* to Kant's inquiry into the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments, every philosophical turning point has revolved around the problem of the certainty of knowledge (Gewissheit). This problem concerns not only epistemology's logical foundation but also the legitimacy of philosophy itself: if philosophy cannot explain why knowledge is true, it loses its standing beside the natural sciences. In the nineteenth century, the rise of scientism (Szientismus) and disciplinary specialization brought this crisis to a climax. While the sciences thrived on empirical methods, philosophy was forced to ask whether it could still ground the certainty of knowledge rather than merely critique it.

In this context, Wilhelm Windelband's *On the Certainty of Knowledge* (1873) seeks to restore philosophy's normative role. He argues that philosophy's value lies not in producing knowledge but in grounding its certainty. Beginning with psychology, Windelband examines the feeling of certainty (Gewißeitsgefühl) as a state of mental equilibrium. Yet such psychological certainty reveals only that one is convinced, not that one must be. The necessity of knowledge cannot rest on empirical or causal regularities without falling into relativism.

Rejecting both psychologism and the appeal to ethical belief, Windelband turns to the transcendental normativity of logic. Logical laws, he claims, do not describe how we in fact think but prescribe how we ought to think. Their necessity is not psychological but normative—an ought (Sollen) that alone can secure objectivity and truth. "Logic," he writes, "is less a physiology of thinking than an ethics of thinking." Thus, by grounding knowledge in the ought of thought, Windelband reconstructs Kant's transcendental project and defends philosophy's critical vocation in the age of scientism.

2. Psychological Certainty: The Empirical Point of Departure

Approaching the problem from a cultural-historical perspective, Windelband sketches a genealogy of the scientific spirit. He argues that the development of science is not a linear ascent toward progress but a process oscillating between the domains of natural science,

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historical science, and philosophy. In certain epochs, the human mind concentrates on uncovering the laws of nature; in others, it turns reflexively toward its own activity. Thus, the revival of philosophy tends to occur precisely when humanity begins to doubt the certainty of its own knowledge. Yet such doubt, for Windelband, is not destructive—it is the genuine starting point of philosophy. Whether in Socrates' resistance to sophistic relativism or in Kant's attempt to open a "critical path of reason" (*Kritik der Vernunft*) between empiricism and rationalism, philosophy always redefines itself through the questioning of existing structures of knowledge. Hence Windelband's remark: "Whenever science begins to doubt its own knowledge, it returns to philosophy." ¹Philosophy persists not because it possesses more knowledge than science, but because, when knowledge itself becomes uncertain, only philosophy can clarify once again what it means to "know."

This is not an abstract historical principle but a concrete reflection of Windelband's age. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the specialization of science had fragmented knowledge into isolated disciplines. Natural science was no longer "natural philosophy" but, as Windelband puts it, a "mine of knowledge" (*Wissensbergwerk*), in which researchers "labor silently in their narrow tunnels,"² unable either to grasp the totality or to interpret the meaning of each other's findings. This structural division produced an epistemological crisis: humanity gained ever more knowledge yet lost the ability to comprehend it as a whole. In this situation, Windelband contends, philosophy must reclaim its task of totality—and at the center of that task stands the question of the certainty of knowledge. Even within the most radical currents of natural science, he discerned an unease about the foundations of knowledge: the materialists who most emphatically grounded science in experience were, in another guise, reopening the same old questions concerning spirit, consciousness, and the validity of judgment—questions that had always belonged to philosophy.

It was in this context that a new marginal discipline, psychophysics (*Psychophysik*), emerged as a bridge between philosophy and science. Employing experiment and measurement, it nonetheless touched upon the very conditions of cognition: human perception of the world is not simply received but is structured by unconscious rational functions. What we call "immediate experience" is thus not immediately given, but the result of rational construction. Windelband calls this process the "intellectualization of intuitive activity" (*die Intellectualisierung der Anschauungsthätigkeit*)³, noting that it has decisive implications for the natural sciences: "For the natural sciences must work upon the facts of sensory experience and presuppose their objective validity; yet this intellectualization of intuition, in a certain sense, calls that validity itself into question." Reason, therefore, must be regarded as the condition of every intuitive act directed

toward cognition. Once this condition is shaken, all knowledge derived from experience becomes unstable. Indeed, the more advanced human cognition becomes, the more it begins to doubt itself. Intellectual progress does not bring security but incites the question anew: how much of what we call knowledge is truly certain? This is not mere subjective anxiety but a structural problem born from the very development of knowledge itself.

Windelband begins his reflection on *Gewissheit* with an analysis of ordinary language. In everyday speech, when we claim to be "certain" of a representation, we merely describe a psychological state—"I am conscious of this representation"—rather than a judgment about its truth. Even the faintest perception, once present in consciousness, possesses the same "certainty" as the strongest impression; yet this certainty only expresses awareness of having a feeling or concept, not any truth about its content. Genuine certainty arises only when two representations are related within a judgment—when we affirm something as true. Saying "I have the idea of God" reports a subjective state; saying "God exists" (or "the existence of God is true") constitutes a judgment, and only in this latter case can we properly speak of certainty. Certainty, therefore, is a value we attach to thought in the act of judging—it signifies the conviction that a thought corresponds to reality. Knowledge, in this sense, is the assurance that our judgments conform to truth. As Windelband writes, "The certainty of knowledge is that predicate of our judgments by which we ascribe truth to their content."⁴ Certainty is thus a predicate of judgment, not one of its constitutive elements.

Yet Windelband immediately adds that such certainty, understood as a predicate of judgment, is only derivative. In its primary sense, certainty is a psychological state—a condition of inner equilibrium achieved by the mind in its act of judging. In this state, doubt is silenced and the content of judgment appears endowed with immovable truth. As he puts it: "Certainty is at first not a predicate of judgment but a cognitive state of the soul, in which the soul stands in a special relation to the content of judgment, a relation that itself calls for further inquiry."⁵ Hence Windelband turns to the psychological analysis of this state. Among the various causes of our judgments, he seeks a common and fundamental factor, discovering that every act of thought originates in the mind's drive toward unity among representations. This striving for unity transforms contradiction into cognitive unease, compelling thought to continue until balance is achieved. Certainty, therefore, is not a static completion of cognition but the endpoint of a dynamic psychological process—the harmony that arises when representations cohere.

From this insight, Windelband distinguishes two levels of certainty. One is judgmental certainty—the belief that a given proposition is true; the other is psychological certainty—the subjective absence of doubt. The former can be expressed as a logical proposition, while the latter belongs to psychology as the mind's conviction regarding its judgments. These correspond respectively to the relation between judgment and truth, and between the soul and its

¹ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 2-3.

² Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 3-4.

³ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 6.

⁴ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 8.

⁵ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 8.

representations. As Windelband notes: “Both definitions are one-sided... yet we may already foresee that if a connection between them can be established, we will reach a relation in which the soul, through representations, approaches its object—that is, truth.”⁶ To establish this connection, Windelband introduces the problem of objectivity. Even within subjective thought, cognition depends upon the grasp of representational content—upon thought’s effort to order its objects according to an “objective sequence.” Hence, he writes, “Human thinking is not creative but explorative; the logical form is not the creator of content, but merely the instrument through which the soul seeks unity among its representations in order to achieve the unity of ideas.”⁷

We must therefore distinguish between subjective certainty and objective certainty. The former concerns the consciousness of unity among representations; the latter concerns whether this unity truly reflects the relations of objects themselves. Although subjective certainty may imitate objectivity, it cannot guarantee it. Every subjective belief carries with it an aspiration to truth, but such belief alone cannot establish the objective validity of knowledge. Subjective certainty is a feeling or psychological experience; objective certainty requires an independent standard beyond the subject.

Accordingly, Windelband defines certainty as “that psychological state in which the soul becomes conscious of the contradiction-free unity of its representations as an objective truth” (*Gewissheit ist derjenige psychologische Zustand, in welchem sich die Seele der widerspruchsfreien Einheit ihrer Vorstellungen als einer objektiven Wahrheit bewusst ist*)⁸. In other words, when our ideas harmonize without contradiction and we take that harmony itself to mirror truth, we experience certainty.

This definition combines the psychological and epistemological dimensions of *Gewissheit*. It describes both the inner balance achieved in cognition and the belief that such balance attests to truth. Certainty, then, is at once the mind’s subjective state of unity and the epistemic starting point from which knowledge claims objective validity. In this double structure, Windelband constructs a bridge between normative epistemology and psychological mechanism, thereby giving philosophy, amid the dominance of scientism, a renewed justification for its own legitimacy.

3. Subjective Certainty: From Consensus and Faith to Rational Necessity

Building on the preceding distinction between subjective and objective certainty, Windelband raises the crucial question: how can the former ever lead to the latter? If certainty is merely a psychological state of unity within intuition, it cannot in itself be identical with truth; subjective conviction does not automatically yield objective justification. To address this problem, Windelband turns to the social structure of judgment (*soziale Struktur des Urteilens*).

He observes that individuals habitually rely on the judgments of others to compensate for the uncertainty of their own cognition. In ordinary life, when doubt arises, the most immediate response is to seek confirmation from others. This search for corroboration is not merely informational but psychological—it aims to reinforce one’s own conviction through agreement. When others share our judgment, we are inclined to believe it reliable; when they dissent, even firm convictions begin to waver. Thus, agreement (*Übereinstimmung*)—or consensus—functions psychologically as a preliminary standard of truth, while universal recognition becomes a provisional guarantor of objectivity.

This mechanism has played a decisive role throughout the history of philosophy. The ancient Sophists, by declaring that “man is the measure of all things,” reduced judgment to individual perspective and thereby plunged thought into subjectivism. In response, Socrates sought to restore the concept of truth through consensus, employing dialogue and definition to discover universal structures within diverse opinions. This universality carried an unmistakable ethical meaning: the collective search for truth became a striving for the universally valid. In this movement, “the universal” itself was elevated into a metaphysical category.

Yet for Windelband, any form of “objective certainty” founded upon consensus remains inherently unreliable. Universal assent may serve as a psychological motive for conviction but cannot serve as a criterion of truth. History and experience alike demonstrate that falsehoods can be widely accepted; truth is never decided by the number of votes. Genuine cognition often begins with the insight of a few. To treat “public opinion” (*allgemeine Meinung*) as the measure of truth is not only a logical fallacy but a moral danger—it permits the systematic legitimization of error.

Windelband distinguishes two kinds of universality. The first is empirical universality, formed by the simple aggregation of individual judgments—“A lie told a hundred times becomes the truth,” as the proverb goes. The second is logical universality, grounded in the necessity of thought itself, as exemplified in the a priori forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding. Only the latter leads toward truth. This corresponds to Kant’s dictum that “only the transcendental unity of apperception is objectively valid; the empirical unity of apperception is merely subjectively valid.”⁹ For Windelband, what is “universally thought” is true not because it results from the sum of individual experiences, but because the universal cognitive structure of the human mind makes its object necessary. In other words, the value of cognition lies not in whether a judgment is widely accepted but in whether it issues from the inner necessity of reason.

Nonetheless, this line of reasoning faces a further difficulty: the frequent confusion between causal necessity in psychology and normative necessity in logic. Windelband cautions that if causal determination were made the criterion of truth, then every mental product—including error—would have to be counted as true. This is absurd and would make the very notion of error unintelligible. Hence, the necessity that grounds objective certainty must be non-causal and non-psychological. It is precisely at this point that Windelband formulates the problem of error. Since subjective certainty can arise without objective grounds, we

⁶ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 14.

⁷ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 15.

⁸ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 8.

⁹ Kant. (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer, Allen W. Wood. New York: Cambridge University Press.

must explain how such deviation is possible. Error, he argues, is not a mere absence of cognition but a positive result of the mind's own activity. In its striving for unity, the soul constructs its experiences into a "contradiction-free whole," even when the materials are incomplete. Every judgment so constructed is accompanied by a psychological feeling of certainty. This self-constructed and empirically conditioned mode of cognition constitutes what Windelband calls opinion (*Meinung*)—subjective certainty born solely from psychological necessity.

When such opinions accumulate collectively, they form public opinion (*allgemeine Meinung*), which may display universality without truth. Although psychological laws are common to all humans, the diversity of experiential material ensures that even shared conclusions may rest upon collectively false premises. Public opinion, then, is essentially immature cognition—what Windelband calls the "infantile state of psychology," in which representations are automatically endowed with certainty without critical examination. Its danger lies not only in reinforcing subjective confidence but in amplifying uncritical conformity: consensus masquerades as truth.

On a deeper level, Windelband identifies another source of deviation—interest and preference. Most human thought, he notes, is not driven by the pursuit of knowledge but by desire, duty, or inclination. These interests selectively emphasize or suppress aspects of experience, reshaping cognition according to non-theoretical motives. When ethical interest enters, thought tends to culminate not in objective judgment but in moral self-affirmation.

At its extreme, this ethical determination becomes faith (*Glaube*)—a distinctive form of subjective certainty arising from the psychological fusion of moral consciousness and theoretical representation. The individual binds certain ideas to moral duty, transforming them from criticizable propositions into conditions of moral existence. Faith, therefore, possesses the highest degree of psychological certainty: it shapes the worldview and the very being of the believer. Yet because its ground lies in ethical interest rather than theoretical justification, faith cannot be equated with knowledge. As Windelband states, "in the epistemological sense, faith and opinion stand on the same level"¹⁰: both are products of psychological necessity and cannot serve as evidence of objective certainty. The compelling force of faith derives from the supreme ethical value of its content, not from its truth. To "believe something true" does not make it true. If ethical impulse were to replace epistemic justification, moral motivation would usurp the right of knowledge itself.

Hence, philosophy must abandon the "path of faith" as a route to epistemic certainty and instead pursue a critical analysis of logical form and judgment. Only by doing so can it defend its independence between science and religion. Whether *Meinung* or *Glaube*, both represent forms of subjective necessity confined within psychological structure. Their certainty stems not from logical validity but from conformity to emotional or ethical compulsion. Even the most passionate conviction cannot prove the reality of its object; the "sacredness" of faith is valid only for the believer, and its claim to universality vanishes once imposed upon others.

¹⁰ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie*. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 50.

This situation compels philosophy to seek within thinking itself a necessity that transcends psychology and morality. Windelband thus formulates his famous proposition: "What is necessarily thought is true" (*Was notwendig gedacht wird, ist wahr*)¹¹. This marks a decisive philosophical leap—the attempt to treat the necessity of thought as the bridge to truth, freeing knowledge from empirical contingency and psychological determination, and grounding certainty within the very structure of logical form.

To illuminate this transition, Windelband invokes Kant's ethics as a counterexample. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant introduces the "postulates of pure practical reason" (*Postulate der reinen praktischen Vernunft*)¹², asserting that the moral law requires us to conceive a world in which the highest good (*das höchste Gut*)—the unity of virtue and happiness—can be realized. This moral demand provides a rational basis for positing God and the immortality of the soul. Yet, as Windelband incisively observes, this ethical construction, though formally rational, covertly transforms a feeling of hope—the desire that virtue be rewarded—into a principle of cognition. His critique reveals that even in the most rigorous rationalism, interest can infiltrate and dominate theoretical reason. Therefore, unless philosophy can establish within the necessity of thought a set of norms independent of psychological and ethical conditions, the objective certainty of knowledge will remain precarious. Philosophy must not rest content with analyzing subjective mechanisms or moral faith; it must, through reflection on the laws of thought themselves, secure an objective and universally valid foundation for knowledge.

4. Objective Certainty: Logical Law as Transcendental Norm

Can we discover within thought a kind of necessity that genuinely leads to objective certainty (objective *Gewissheit*)? Windelband argues that neither psychological necessity—as embodied in opinion—nor ethical necessity—as embodied in faith—can fulfill this task;¹³ both keep us confined within the subject's inner activity rather than guiding us from subject to object. He therefore introduces logical necessity (*logische Notwendigkeit*) as a third, properly normative mode of thinking. Unlike the laws of nature studied by psychology, logical laws (*das logische Gesetz*) concern how we ought to think; they possess an explicitly prescriptive character. Such laws are not products of mental mechanisms but "norms given to thought" (*eine dem Denken gegebene Norm*)¹⁴. Precisely in virtue of this a priori, mind-independent normativity, logical necessity can underwrite objective certainty: its authority does not derive from inductive generalization over widespread experiences, but from its transcendental status, independent of individual psychology. In short, logical laws are not empirical facts but transcendental norms that address the same demands to all

¹¹ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie*. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 51.

¹² Kant. (2015). *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated and edited by Mary Gregor, Andrews Reath. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹³ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie*. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 60.

¹⁴ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie*. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 68.

rational agents and therefore hold universally, whether or not one is explicitly aware of them.

Within these universally valid laws, the necessity of thought can truly vouch for the certainty of knowledge. This necessity no longer depends on a subject's experiences or psychological states; it rests on the self-consistency of reason. Logic furnishes a unified, internally coherent framework within which reflection can assess the rightness of thinking by the criterion of non-contradiction. Windelband accords logical law a special status because it provides a direct standard for truth and falsity. If logic were merely a subdivision of natural law, then all judgments generated by psychological mechanisms would stand on the same footing, and truth would collapse into error. The contrary is the case: we must be able to distinguish "error" from "truth," which requires a supra-empirical normative standard—precisely what logical law supplies. As Windelband puts it: "Rather than a physiology of thinking, logic is an ethics of thinking."¹⁵

The point is teleological: logical laws regulate right thinking just as ethical laws regulate right action. Such norms neither coerce like natural laws nor are they invariably obeyed in practice. One may act or judge correctly without explicit awareness of moral or logical law; yet only when these norms are consciously internalized do reflection and genuine appraisal of right and wrong become possible. In a manner akin to Kant's contrast between a merely lawful act and a truly moral act, Windelband maintains that a "correct judgment" achieves full certainty only when it satisfies the testing standards of logical law.

Windelband repeatedly emphasizes that the transcendental character of logical law grounds its normativity. Logic does not arise from psychological processes; it is given as law—a norm that we ought (Sollen) to follow, though we may in fact fail to follow it. Its objectivity is therefore normative rather than empirical, and it bears a kind of self-evidence (unmittelbare Evidenz). Consequently, the logical ought is not a mere rhetorical form of rational command; within Windelband's system it performs the crucial task of justifying the certainty of knowledge. Only when thought consciously submits to logical law can knowledge secure a standard of agreement with itself and escape the relativism fostered by psychological mechanisms and ethical motives.

A natural worry arises: if only thoughts conforming to logical norms count as knowledge, is the scope of knowledge unduly restricted? Windelband does not evade this problem. His framework of logical necessity is not meant to encompass all forms of spiritual life; it establishes the validity conditions for cognition in the strict sense. Experiences in ethics, aesthetics, or religion may yield strong subjective certainty, but they cannot claim truth in an epistemological sense. Hence, if philosophy is to reassert its legitimacy within the order of knowledge, it must appeal to logical normativity rather than to the ubiquity of psychological mechanisms or the intensity of ethical motivation. As the normative "ought" of thinking," logical law supplies not merely formal criteria for thought but also philosophy's last line of defense for its epistemic authority. In this precise sense, Windelband answers the problem of certainty by appeal to the necessity of logic.

Windelband's doctrine of logical necessity should not be confused with a crude logicism. His question is subtler: How can the norms of logic (Normen der Logik) become objective standards of knowledge if they are not causally generated by the psyche? He first marks the fundamental difference between logical necessity and psychological law. Logical necessity does not describe how people in fact think; it prescribes how they ought to think. It belongs to "ought" (Sollen) rather than "is" (Sein), thereby distinguishing itself from both psychological and ethical necessity. Logical necessity is the condition under which truth and error are even thinkable; the very possibility of calling a judgment false presupposes a norm that does not depend on anyone's experiences.

At the same time, this logical ought is not a merely subjective construction, because the laws of logic are "given" to thought. Whether in the content of sensibility or in the form of logic, whatever bears objectivity must, in some sense, be given to the subject. Knowledge, therefore, cannot be fabricated solely by the subject; in both form and content it presupposes a dimension of givenness that transcends individual invention.

This is the point at which Windelband introduces "givenness" (Gegebenheit). We can take an object as given only if it is present in the soul in some mode of possibility; otherwise, cognition of it would be impossible. We cannot, by fiat, construct the rule that "the interior angles of a triangle equal 180 degrees," nor can we decree by sheer will the causal rule that "like causes under like conditions necessarily produce like effects." Here Windelband aligns with Kant's transcendental apperception: the unity of experiential representations must be grounded in a self-unity of the faculties. Yet, departing from a purely formal Kantianism, Windelband accords equal weight to experiential content. Everything we intuit—form and content alike—is the unfolding of the soul's functions, present in the individual as possibilities that condition empirical psychology. The development of cognitive functions is neither arbitrary nor spontaneous; it is evoked by what is given. Thus logical norms and experiential content together constitute knowledge as a unity of subject and object—beyond a merely formal, non-empirical, closed unity.

From the nature of logical law, Windelband derives a first stratum of certainty. He distinguishes (1) the "immediate certainty" (unmittelbare Gewissheit) belonging to the norms themselves—a certainty not inferred from elsewhere but grounded in the inner consistency of thought and in the quasi-metaphysical status of law as a given norm; and (2) the "certainty of proof" (Gewissheit des Beweises), the rational warrant for judgments articulated through the ground-consequence relation (Grund-Folge). Hume sought to reduce causality to habit, but, as Windelband notes, it is precisely causal law that makes habit possible. Still, logic can secure at most a formal objectivity; it cannot, by itself, guarantee the truth of empirical content. Formal objectivity remains hypothetical, for the truth of any logical derivation depends upon the truth of its judgments, and logic does not supply content on its own. As with Kant's forms of intuition and categories, logical form does not generate content; content must be received through experience. The remaining question, therefore, is this: How are the subjective forms of logic to be united with the content of experience?

¹⁵ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 66.

5. The Unity of Logical Form and Empirical Content: From Kant to Windelband

To resolve the problem of how subjective logical forms can be united with empirical content, Windelband turns to a discussion of the law of causality (*Kausalgesetz*). Drawing on the philosophical foundations of Kant, Fichte, the Friesian school, and Schopenhauer, he argues that the causal law constitutes the fundamental function through which empirical objects are formed. Logical law regulates the structure of thought, whereas causality determines the connection of representational contents. The latter is not itself a part of logic but rather a productive cognitive function that enables the various elements of experience to combine in a lawlike manner so as to form recognizable objects. Especially in Schopenhauer, causality is defined as an intellectual function possessing the force of a natural law, serving as the basic instrument by which subjectivity constructs the content of experience. By distinguishing causality from logic, Windelband reveals that knowledge depends simultaneously upon two normative systems: logic provides the unity of form, while causality ensures the organization of content.

Even so, knowledge confronts a deeper question: how are we “given” the content of experience? Windelband acknowledges that “the elements of sensible intuition—space, time, and causality—are all subjective functions” (*subjektive Funktionen*); sensibility possesses universal structural functions.¹⁶ Yet in actual perception these structures operate in ways not determined by subjective arbitrariness but are, in a certain sense, “given” (*gegeben*) to the subject. For example, when I perceive a green circle at a particular moment, its shape, color, size, and spatial position are not products of my volition; they present themselves spontaneously within consciousness under empirical conditions. This non-arbitrary givenness of representation provides the first foundation of objectivity in knowledge. That is, although the form of sensibility is subjective, its actual application is determined by conditions that are given rather than chosen. Such “givenness” does not originate from a traditional “thing-in-itself” (*Ding-an-sich*), nor is it one link in a psychological causal chain; it is the structural passivity of the subject in the face of experiential content.

To further consolidate the certainty of knowledge, Windelband turns to inner perception, asking how subjectivity can become an object to itself. This inquiry yields a second foundation of certainty. Through an analysis of memory and reflection, he observes that when we judge a representation to be something we “once had,” we do not rely on objective comparison between recurring contents but on a distinctive feeling of memory—a peculiar awareness that accompanies the current representation and assures us that it has truly appeared in our consciousness before. This “feeling of recognition” (*Gefühl der Wiedererkennung*) is not a passive duplication of earlier experience but an active awareness of unity within the self. Its possibility presupposes what Kant called the transcendental unity of apperception (*die transzendente Einheit der Apperzeption*): only through the self’s consciousness of its own unity can different temporal states be attributed to the same enduring “I,” and thus become remembered experiences. Such identity is not merely a condition for

memory but the precondition for all judgments of certainty within inner perception.

On this basis, Windelband articulates a precise definition of knowledge: “Knowledge is that form of certainty which unites subject and object under the condition that the representational contents given in outer and inner perception are, under the norms of logical law and the law of causality, processed into cognitions possessing objective validity.”¹⁷ In this process, knowledge distinguishes itself from faith (*Glaube*), for it contains not only subjective conviction but a necessary relation between content and form. Moreover, knowledge differs from the empirical impressions of pure psychology, because it is confirmed within a normative structure. Windelband further stresses that the essence of knowledge lies in its impersonality (*Unpersönlichkeit*): in the act of knowing, individual desires, preferences, and contingent motives are suspended and replaced by universal normativity. This impersonality confers an ethical dimension upon cognition—it demands that the subject transcend itself in the face of truth.

Having unfolded the analysis of logical law, causality, givenness, and subjective unity, Windelband arrives at his final view on the certainty of knowledge. Cognition can indeed achieve objective certainty, yet this does not imply any identity between the representational content and the essence of being. What knowledge discloses is not the world itself but the world’s effect upon us—the necessary form in which existence impresses itself upon consciousness. The certainty of knowledge, therefore, does not arise from possessing reality but from being compelled to represent it in a determinate way. In other words, we “know as we must” not because we grasp the world as it is, but because we are bound to know it thus.

In all cognition, there exists an impulse toward representation of reality—the desire to depict a world independent of the subject. Yet philosophical analysis forces us to renounce this hope: there can be no essential identity or one-to-one correspondence between representational content and external being. What remains is only a relation to the unknown world, and it is within this relation that the subject’s cognitive function is activated and operates in a non-arbitrary, non-subjective manner. Hence, the objective certainty we can attain is not the grasp of things “in themselves,” but the recognition that, under given conditions, things are necessarily represented thus.

In this respect, Windelband enters into dialogue with Herbart and Lotze. From Herbart he adopts the notion that “representation is the self-preservative act of the soul in resistance to the mutual penetration of another reality” (*die Vorstellung ist die Selbsterhaltung der Seele gegen das Eindringen einer anderen Realität*)¹⁸; from Lotze he accepts the view that representation is “the product of the interaction between subjective and objective events.” Whether approached from Herbart’s metaphysical realism or Lotze’s critical idealism, Windelband insists that cognition is essentially an “event” (*Ereignis*) in the metaphysical sense, one that must be comprehended within a higher ontological framework. He therefore agrees with Leibniz and Herbart

¹⁶ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 78-79.

¹⁷ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 90.

¹⁸ Windelband, W. (1873). *Ueber die Gewissheit der Erkenntnis*, Eine Psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie. Berlin: Verlag von F. Henschel. 94.

that metaphysics must find its completion in epistemology: only when metaphysics explains how events are possible—above all, how the event of cognition is possible—does epistemology reach its conclusion.

The transition from epistemology to metaphysics hinges upon the function of the causal law. Windelband maintains that the possibility of knowledge rests upon the operation of the principle of causality. Since the soul contains no inner determination directing its functions toward specific contents, such determination must arise from the relation between subject and object. In this sense, the principle of causality, as a fundamental function of thought, provides the only legitimate basis for knowledge. The intelligibility of thinking depends upon its structural regularities; yet, simultaneously, cognition of the world becomes possible only through this same structure. The result is an apparently inescapable circle of cognition (*Erkenntniskreis*): we can understand thought only through thought itself, and such understanding necessarily unfolds through the interplay of causal law and law of cognition (*Erkenntnisgesetz*). Windelband later expands this circular structure in his discussion of *Völkerpsychologie* (ethnic or cultural psychology).

Importantly, Windelband does not regard this circular structure as a defect or paradox. Rather, he interprets it as revealing the dynamic relationship between cognition and reality. Knowledge sees itself as the ground of cognition (*Erkenntnisgrund*), while the world serves as the real ground (*Realgrund*) upon which knowledge depends. The relation between them is not a static causal chain but a fluid, reciprocal ring, a continuous interaction. This circularity provides philosophy with a profoundly productive tension: it clarifies the mechanism of cognition and simultaneously points toward the metaphysical dimension of thought itself.

Thus, at the conclusion of *On the Certainty of Knowledge*, Windelband offers a suggestive insight: we may never escape the circle of subjectivity, yet within this circle the relation between cognition and world, thought and being, is revealed. This circular motion—the reciprocity between epistemology and event—forms the foundation of philosophical inquiry. To understand this circle, Windelband suggests, is perhaps the true starting point for entering his entire philosophical system.

The certainty of knowledge, ultimately, is the necessity of “representing as we must” (*das notwendige So-Vorstellen*). Such an epistemology, though aiming to overcome relativism, remains within the Kantian horizon: its foundation still appeals to transcendental logical law. As is well known, however, just as analytic judgments yield no new knowledge, pure transcendental logic cannot provide the material content of all cognition. Traditional epistemology, therefore, cannot escape the tension between reason and experience. In Windelband, the problem of the certainty of knowledge leads to a complete “return to Kant” (*Zurück zu Kant*), but this return also inherits the psychological tendency of Kant’s philosophy—a tendency that, in Windelband’s own time, would reappear in the form of *Völkerpsychologie*.

6. Conclusion

Windelband’s *On the Certainty of Knowledge* reconstructs the foundation of epistemic certainty through a transcendental turn from psychology to logic. Against both psychologism and ethical voluntarism, he grounds

knowledge not in subjective conviction or moral faith but in the normative necessity of logical laws. Logical necessity functions as the ought that governs thought, ensuring the objectivity and universality of cognition. Yet this formal certainty acquires real significance only when joined with the causal and given structures of experience. Knowledge thus emerges as a synthesis of logical form and empirical content—a unity of subject and object achieved under normative conditions.

For Windelband, the certainty of knowledge does not signify possession of being but the necessity of representation: we know the world only as we must think it. In this way, he extends Kant’s transcendental philosophy into a new critical framework that resists both scientism and relativism. The certainty of knowledge becomes, ultimately, the ethical and logical imperative of thought itself.

7. References

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