

## Letter to E. Nagel

December 9, 1953

Professor Ernest Nagel  
Department of Philosophy  
Columbia University  
New York 27, N.Y.

Dear Professor Nagel:

Thank you for your very kind letter of November 28.

Before going into the subject matter as such, please let me tell you how much I appreciate the expression of your warm and friendly feelings regarding the possible contribution that I might make to the Conference on "The Methods of Knowledge" that you are arranging, and your kindness in wanting to make my participation possible. I am also very gratified in what you tell me about the feelings of your colleagues on this matter.

My trouble is, that I know from past experiences that it is completely uncertain whether I can complete the manuscript that appears to be necessary, the more so because the possible delays between June and October do not help me, since I will be abroad during that period. I do not want to disturb the orderly progress of your arrangements by making a promise on which you will count, and which I probably cannot keep. In addition, unfulfilled promises on publications have usually had a disrupting effect on my work, because while I am not writing the thing that I have promised to write, I am also inhibited from doing other work that could otherwise go quite well. I really owe it to you and to all my friends in all sincerity not to make such promises, since I have every reason to doubt whether I could fulfill them in an adequate way.

I hope you will not view the lines which follow as a criticism. I know that you have considered the arrangements for the Conference very carefully, and that you have weighed all pros and cons. It would therefore certainly be quite out of place if I would start making suggestions on a subject that you have studied very carefully and I have not. I would, nevertheless, like to mention that I think it is better for someone who does not feel the spontaneous desire to write on a subject not to be induced by external circumstances into taking on such a project. I have participated in the past in group discussions and symposia and derived much benefit and satisfaction from them, and would be more than happy to participate in the one that you are now arranging, if my part in it could stay on the oral level. If it has to be connected with publication, then I am afraid I must excuse myself. I am sure I could not produce anything satisfactory for the occasion unless I felt a

strong subjective desire to write on the topic, i.e. unless I felt that I had ideas on the subject, of sufficient scope, which have not been expressed before – and this is not the case. I think the maxim “verba volant, scripta manent” is not necessarily an argument against “verba”.

I hope you will not think too badly of me for my inability to contribute a paper, and my unwillingness, in view of this, to promise one. I also hope you will not consider my last remarks too severely.

I am,

Yours very sincerely,

*Original in Von Neumann Papers, Library of Congress. language of original: English*