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Walter Benjamin and ‘materialism’

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

August 2015

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Doctor of Philosophy

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Summary

This thesis examines the emergence of Walter Benjamin’s materialism, within his early thought, from within the context of post-Kantian philosophy. The original contribution made by this thesis is that it differentiates Benjamin’s materialism from both Romanticism and neo-Kantianism, on the one side, and empiricism, on the other. In contrast to those who identify Benjamin as a practitioner of a Romantic form of immanence, a neo-Kantian or a mystical empiricist, I place Benjamin’s materialism within the context of the conflict between an empiricist form of materialism and post-Kantian idealism.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, I examine the history of materialism and its critical reception in the Kantian idealist tradition. The second chapter examines the development of Karl Marx’s materialism. I show that Marx’s conception of reality fundamentally challenges traditional conceptions of idealism and materialism. In the third chapter, I show that Benjamin’s critique of neo-Kantianism necessarily points towards a concept of knowledge that can encompass the particularity of experience qua sense experience within itself, something that is closed off in the neo-Kantian attempt to secure the objective validity of knowledge. The final chapter focuses on Benjamin’s attempt to locate an expanded concept of experience. I look at several instances of how this concept manifests itself in the poem, life and language. I develop a materialist account of the idea that runs counter to the neo-Kantian one. Finally, I conclude by showing the limits of the Romantic concept of immanence for Benjamin.

Throughout this thesis, I examine how Benjamin breaks out of both the neo-Kantian and Romantic strands of post-Kantian idealism. I also pay close attention to Benjamin’s critique of empiricism. This thesis demonstrates that Benjamin’s materialism emerges out of a serious engagement with that tradition, yet it remains irreducible to a form of neo-Kantianism, Romanticism, or empiricism.

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:..... **Date:**.....

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the loving support of my wife Jamila. This work is dedicated to her. I would also like to thank my father Richard for all of his help.

I thank my supervisors, Gordon Finlayson and Darrow Schecter, for their limitless patience and continuous support throughout my time at Sussex. Gordon's critical eye kept me honest while Darrow's passion kept me motivated. I cannot imagine a better combination. I would also like to sincerely thank Florian Bail who, during my undergraduate degree, provided me the space to discover German idealist philosophy and critical theory from within an IR-oriented political science department.

I began this work under difficult circumstances. I started under the supervision of Margarete Kohlenbach, who was made redundant by the administration of the University of Sussex. In a meeting with one of these wise administrators, I was told that it did not matter, because "after the first year you know more than your supervisor anyway." I seriously doubted the validity of that statement then and I continue to doubt it now. I hope that my efforts here reflect, if only in the smallest degree, Margarete's amazing scholarship.

Of course, this work would not have been possible without the support of some excellent colleagues. I would like to especially thank Chris O'Kane, Tom Bunyard and Tim Carter. Our discussions in the pub and the reading group we took part in, along with Chris Arthur, was essential in helping me come to grips with Marxian theory, particularly the theory of value.

Working on neo-Kantianism is a lonely task, but I was lucky enough to find a fellow traveller in Christos Hadjioannou. I would like to thank him for his interest and friendship.

I would be remiss if I didn't thank my friends Zoe Sutherland, Sebastian Truskolaski, Betty Schulz, Sami Khatib, Jana Elson, Verena Erlenbusch, Chris Allsobrook, Gabriel Martin, Matt Charles, Timo Uotinen, Hammam Aldouri, Leena Petersen, Lawrence Sussex, Simon Mussell, Hamed Yousefi, Dave Hodge and Rob Lucas.

All errors are, of course, my own and anything remotely interesting would not have been possible without the support and influence of so many inspiring and brilliant friends.

Preface

This thesis examines materialism in the early thought of Walter Benjamin. It is my contention that Benjamin develops his form of materialism from within the context of post-Kantian idealism, in particular through an engagement, first, with neo-Kantianism and then with German Romanticism. At the same time, Benjamin's thought cannot be simply viewed as an extension of either neo-Kantian or Romantic forms of idealism. Benjamin comes to fundamentally question both the neo-Kantian and Romantic concepts of criticism—*epistemological critique* in the case of neo-Kantianism and *immanent critique* in the case of Romanticism—and their conceptions of objectivity. It is, however, also important to acknowledge that, for Benjamin, Romanticism and neo-Kantianism represent a manifestation of a historical problematic. Thus, while Benjamin demonstrates the limit of both Romanticism and neo-Kantianism, much of his time is spent demonstrating the place that these philosophies occupy in what he calls the “problem-historical context”. I take this context to be modernity itself. Romanticism and neo-Kantianism represent attempts to engage with the fundamental nature of contemporary reality, specifically the absence of a totalising Absolute. In this thesis I approach Benjamin, specifically the early Benjamin, through the lens of post-Kantian idealism. I do so in order to demonstrate: first, how he problematises the post-Kantian philosophical tradition; and, second, how Benjamin understands that tradition as a re-presentation of the historical problematic of modernity.

Both the Romantic and neo-Kantian philosophies are characterised by a sense of longing for a totality that exists either in the form of an idealised past or in a future in which reason has become fully actualised in reality. This sense of loss or longing is something that Benjamin grapples with throughout his early writings. It is not surprising, therefore, that Benjamin interrogates both neo-Kantianism and Romanticism as potential sources of reconciliation between fragmentary experience and a promise of unity and totality in the Absolute. It quickly becomes clear that neither the subjective and immanent Romantic nor the objective and transcendent neo-Kantian approach to this loss is convincing for him. Rather, for Benjamin, neo-Kantianism and Romanticism come to represent a manifestation of a historico-philosophical problematic. It is through engagement with both strands of post-Kantian philosophy, along with the historico-philosophical problematic that they bring to light, that Benjamin's form of materialism comes to emerge.

In addition to examining Benjamin's materialism, I also devote a great deal of this thesis to developing the intellectual and philosophical context in which it emerges. In particular, I examine the origins of the neo-Kantianism as a response to scientific materialism. As I demonstrate, the neo-Kantian 'return to Kant' begins as an attempt to refute the naïve realism of scientific materialism. The neo-Kantian return to Kant is coloured by the refutation of some of the core epistemological assumptions made by scientific materialism. For his part, Benjamin comes to engage with neo-Kantian philosophy at a time when it has come to dominate the German academy. Although the two schools of neo-Kantianism were opposed on certain matters, both the South-West and Marburg Schools of neo-Kantianism agreed on the need to ground philosophy objectively and scientifically. Put simply, neo-Kantianism aimed to secure the grounds of philosophy as something more than a subjective science of spirit or the human. In fact, in doing so they believed that they could even provide an objective and scientifically valid grounding for ethics, history and the whole realm of the human sciences.

My examination of Marx's materialism attempts to show the errors of the abstract idealist form of thought through his criticism of the fetishisation of capitalist reality by the quasi-scientific standpoint of political economy. Marx's reflections on the nature of capitalist reality and the metaphysical structure of our everyday experience demonstrate the limit of traditional idealist and materialist positions, particularly in regards to the relationship between concepts and reality. For this reason, I found it necessary to sketch the development of Marx's thought through his early engagement with Hegelian idealism, Feuerbachian material empiricism and, finally, what I see as his implicit reconciliation of these two poles in *Capital*. Benjamin and Marx represent, in different ways, the limits of both materialism and idealism traditionally conceived. Further, for both, their materialism emerges through an extensive engagement with idealism: Hegelian and Young Hegelian thought for Marx and Kantianism and post-Kantian thought for Benjamin.

My aim in bringing together all of this material is to come to an understanding of Benjamin's materialism and its place within the philosophical context of neo-Kantianism, Marxism and Romanticism. Beyond this expositional aim, I explore how Benjamin's concept of criticism emerges out of and makes productive a tension he perceives between concrete material empiricism and abstract conceptual idealism. In other words, how his concept of criticism maintains both the material particularity of its object while also acknowledging a speculative dimension of potentiality imprinted on things. Works of art or

historical events, for instance, are things that exist in this world, yet they also contain a form of potentiality that cannot simply be extinguished by reducing them to a set of material qualities. Historical objects also contain within themselves an excess of meaning and significance that cannot be distilled through a strictly empirical analysis.

Benjamin's concept of criticism aims to cut through the false opposition between a form of material empiricism and conceptual idealism. In doing so, he recognises the essential relationship between the material and the conceptual. It is here that we can find Benjamin's materialist conception of the idea, something I examine quite closely in the final chapter of this thesis. Benjamin, like Marx, offers an alternative to the materialist tradition from within that tradition. Benjaminian materialism cannot be equated with the monism or realism of materialism qua empiricism. Both Marx and Benjamin recognise that the ideal existence of concepts and ideas are real, even if those concepts and ideas possess a material foundation.

Marx and Benjamin challenge the orthodoxy that equates materialism with a restrictive notion of scientism and empiricism. My aim is to examine this challenge through the lens of a materialist account of perception. Both Marx and Benjamin ultimately reject the empiricist premise that sense experience alone can be the valid grounds for knowledge of reality. Our experience and, therefore, reality itself is formed, at least partially, on the basis of conceptual reflection. At the same time, both equally reject the idealist belief that the conceptual categories upon which that reflection is founded belong to the timeless realm of abstract ideas. Throughout his early work, Benjamin attempts to ground his account perception and conceptuality in the historical. This is a tricky balancing act since Benjamin wishes to maintain the integrity of the conceptual, not reducing it to a mere by-product of experience. Rather than seeing this as an inconsistency in Benjamin's thought, I examine it as a motivating tension that ultimately comes to frame his materialist standpoint.

In the first chapter, I examine the Kantian challenge to the orthodox separation of materialism and idealism that, despite its best intentions, results in a form of abstract idealism that nihilistically rejects the validity and objectivity of the empirical world. Marx and Benjamin must find a way to balance a politics that is fundamentally sceptical about the validity and value of reality—capitalism or modernity—and a theoretical claim that the alternative is not to be discovered 'out there' beyond reality in an abstract and purely conceptual ideal. My claim, therefore, is that both find a way through the ultimately false

opposition of the abstract conceptual and the concrete material that frames the debate between materialism and idealism.

I divide this thesis into four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter examines materialism and its critics quite broadly, concluding with an examination of one of the founding figures of neo-Kantianism, Friedrich Albert Lange. The aim of this chapter is to come to grips with the theoretical core of materialism and the critical reception by Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy. In my discussion of Lange's critique of metaphysical materialism, I aim to sketch the general background of neo-Kantianism. Lange's rejection of metaphysical materialism, along with Hermann von Helmholtz signal theory of perception, helps contextualise the central epistemological principles of both schools of neo-Kantianism, as I show in the third chapter.

This chapter is followed by an examination of Marx's materialism. Here, I undertake an examination of Marx's materialism from his early engagement with Hegel and Feuerbach to his mature thought, most notably the theoretical and philosophical implications of his masterwork, *Capital*. My contention is largely that there is a pendulum shift from Marx's early idealist works to a form of theoretical empiricism, most notably in *The German Ideology*. These two extremes are reconciled in *Capital*. While this reconciliation is not posited explicitly, I aim to make clear that the epistemological and theoretical implications of Marx's mature positions represent a fundamental alternative to both idealism and materialism traditionally conceived. As I show, in *Capital*, Marx develops a notion of *social objectivity* that allows for the critic of society to acknowledge the reality of its object—it is not conceived merely as a mistake of consciousness that can be dispelled subjectively through a change in consciousness—while, at the same time, positing the possibility of its transcendence.

Following my examination of Marx's materialism, I move to Benjamin and his relationship to neo-Kantianism. In this chapter I emphasise the critique of neo-Kantianism that Benjamin develops in his early writings, most notably in his essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy". In this chapter I also aim to bring to light the importance of neo-Kantianism as the context in which Benjamin's own thought is developed. There has been little discussion of Benjamin's relationship to the neo-Kantian tradition in the English-language scholarship. Fredrick Beiser noted this absence in his review of an edited collection of texts on 19th century philosophy. To Beiser's surprise, there was not a single article on neo-Kantianism in the collection. Beiser writes, "It is necessary to recognize... a

basic and indisputable fact: that neo-Kantianism, for better or worse, was the most widespread and influential development in Germany philosophy from the 1840s to 1900s.”¹ Despite work that examines Benjamin’s relationship to Romanticism, Nietzsche and even empiricism, there has been no work that systematically examines Benjamin’s relationship to the neo-Kantian tradition, a remarkable oversight in light of the importance of neo-Kantianism both historically and as a form of philosophy with which Benjamin was intimately familiar.²

In my examination of neo-Kantianism, I wish to bring to light the fundamental differences between the two schools of neo-Kantianism—the Marburg and South-West or Baden School—and demonstrate how Benjamin navigates these two, sometimes opposed, philosophical orientations. The central claim in this chapter is that Benjamin’s own conception of experience comes to light through his critique of neo-Kantian philosophy, in particular Hermann Cohen’s dismissal of sense experience as something without meaning or significance. As I show, Benjamin contextualises neo-Kantianism within the Kantian critical project and the historical context of modernity more generally.

The conclusion addresses the position Benjamin’s own materialism stands against certain elements of both neo-Kantianism and Romanticism. At the same time, however, Benjamin’s materialism emerges through a serious engagement with both of these philosophies. Benjamin’s materialistic outlook comes to the fore in his engagement with the neo-Kantian and Romantic notions of objectivity.

¹ See Fredrick Beiser, “Review of *Nineteenth Century Philosophy: Revolutionary Responses to the Existing Order*. August 31, 2008, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* <<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/25677-nineteenth-century-philosophy-revolutionary-responses-to-the-existing-order/>>

In recent years Beiser has published several excellent volumes on the history of the development and philosophical context of neo-Kantianism.

² In *Hegel contra Sociology*, Gillian Rose acknowledges an affinity between Benjamin’s Marxism and neo-Kantianism, yet it remains on the margins of her work. In part, I aim to show, in Chapter 3, how Benjamin breaks out of the confines of neo-Kantianism as Rose understands it. In particular, I show how Benjamin differentiates his notion of concept-formation from neo-Kantians such as Rickert and Simmel.

1. Metaphysical Materialism and its Critics

This chapter examines materialism and its critique. My main focus will be on what is referred to as *metaphysical materialism* and the critique of materialism put forward both by Kant himself along with the early neo-Kantians Hermann von Helmholtz and Friedrich Albert Lange. This Kantian critique will come to form the basis of the neo-Kantian conception of epistemology and its mode of criticism. Understanding both metaphysical materialism and its critical reception is central to grasping Benjamin's relationship to both empirical materialism and idealism. Benjamin's philosophical orientation is irreducible to the form of abstract logical idealism characteristic of neo-Kantianism or the metaphysical materialist's scientific empiricism. Rather, Benjamin attempts to reconcile the specificity of empirical or sensuous experience with the metaphysical nature of the logical structures that come to shape that experience.

The term metaphysical materialism carries a mark of its philosophical origin as a derogatory name for a form of scientific materialism that develops in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. The central premise of metaphysical materialism is that reality is entirely physical in nature. This movement includes the scientist-philosophers Karl Vogt, Jacob Moleschott, Ludwig Büchner¹ and Heinrich Czolbe. The general aim of this movement can be understood as an attempt to harmonise philosophical epistemology and ontology with the latest scientific developments, particularly advances in the physiology of sensation.² The scientific materialists opposed what they saw as the epistemological scepticism expressed in Kantian and post-Kantian idealism. However, as its neo-Kantian critics point out, what occurs in scientific materialism is the hypostatisation of metaphysical presuppositions and the extension of its scientific insights beyond the scope of the exact sciences. In doing so, the neo-Kantians accuse scientific materialism of provide a mechanistic and deterministic view of history, culture and, ultimately, freedom. As I show in this chapter, the form of scientific monism central to metaphysical materialism fundamentally violates the distinction between the realm of freedom and the world of nature that Kant maintains. For Kant, the maintenance of this distinction is central to distinguishing the concept of freedom from that of necessity. As I show when with

¹ Ludwig Büchner is the brother of the author Georg Büchner, whom Walter Benjamin identifies as one of the anticipators of what he terms *anthropological materialism*.

² Broadly speaking, metaphysical or scientific materialism could be described as a form of naïve realism. I will discuss this in more detail when I examine scientific materialism in this chapter.

Friedrich Albert Lange at the conclusion of this chapter and with Heinrich Rickert and Hermann Cohen in the third chapter, the separation between a human world of values, culture and freedom and a natural world ruled by mechanistic forces and necessity remains essential to the neo-Kantian project as well.

The critique of metaphysical materialism comes to frame the epistemological problematic of early neo-Kantianism, specifically in regards to their conception of the relationship between knowledge and experience. As much as the Kantian philosophy itself, the critique of materialism comes to frame Helmholtz' theory of perception and Lange's standpoint of the idea and the limit both place on sensuous perception and experience. Before engaging with the relationship to metaphysical materialism and neo-Kantianism, I examine the origin of the materialist standpoint along with the Kantian critique of materialism in order to develop the context from which both scientific materialism and early neo-Kantianism emerge.

I begin the chapter by examining the two most prevalent forms of materialism—*mechanism* and *vitalism*—that offer conflicting conceptions of the natural world. At the heart of this debate is a conflict between two the fundamental forms of materialism: *mechanistic* atomism and *vitalistic* hylozoism. Second, I look at Kant's extended critique of materialism and hylozoism; third, I examine *scientific materialism* in nineteenth century Germany and the origins of neo-Kantianism in Hermann von Helmholtz' attempt to harmonise Kantian philosophy and his own scientific theories; and, finally, I outline Friedrich Albert Lange's neo-Kantian critique of materialism and the development of his standpoint of the idea.

1.1 Atomism and Mechanical Materialism

In his pre-Critical text, "Dreams of a spirit-seer elucidated by dreams of metaphysics", Immanuel Kant lays out the difference between the two types of materialism: "*Hylozoism* invests everything with life, while *materialism*, when carefully considered, deprives everything of life."³ The distinction between *hylozoism* and *mechanical materialism* provides a good starting point for an understanding of materialism as a philosophical position because they mark its possible extremes. I begin by contextualising materialism, first, in its

³ Immanuel Kant, "Dreams of a spirit-seer elucidated by dreams of metaphysics," in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 317-18.

mechanistic atomist and, second, in its vitalistic hylozoist form. Following this, I move on to an examination of Kant's treatment of materialism, which helps set the backdrop for the neo-Kantian critique of materialism.

Materialism, in general, can be broken down into two central ontological claims about the nature of the empirical world: first, reality is composed of matter or the interaction of physical forces; and, second, consciousness is not separate from the material world, but is formed on the basis of material processes. The essence of materialism's conception of reality is *monism*: everything, including consciousness, can be reduced to what is material in nature. It should be noted here that materialism does not make a general claim about the specific nature of these processes or give an account of the composition of matter. Therefore, it is possible to conceive of material interactions mechanically or hylozoistically and remain a consistent materialist. I will now examine two extreme examples in order to demonstrate this possibility beginning with mechanistic materialism.

Mechanistic materialism originates in the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus.⁴ Aristotle provides a succinct description of the two founders of atomism:

Leucippus and his associate Democritus say that the full and the empty are the elements, calling the one being and the other non-being—the full and solid being, the empty non-being (that is why they say that what is no more than what is not, because body no more is than void); and they make these the material causes of things.⁵

For the atomist the object contains its essence within itself in the form of atoms rather than being formed on the basis of a single natural element such as air, fire, water and so on. These atoms form objects by joining together, but never produce a single substance. Objects are composed of a variety of different atoms touching each other without every becoming a whole. For Democritus, what exists is the atom and the empty and change occurs through the movement of atoms within a void.

Atomism runs into problems when it has to account for movement and change. Aristotle explains the atomist's account of change: "For instance, A differs from N in shape, AN from NA in arrangement and Z from N in position."⁶ For the atomist, change occurs through the physical alteration of the combination of atoms within a void. The

⁴ As Felix Cleve writes, "For the first time, we have here the notion of 'matter without consciousness.' Democritus (or Leucippus) forms the notion of *atomoi apatheis*, of 'unfeeling atoms,' being the first to drop the idea of panzoism." Quoted in David Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007). 33.

⁵ Jonathan Barnes, ed. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1558.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1558.

substructure of the object is comprised of various combinations of atoms that are eternal and unchanging, but these atoms can be moved and reconfigured externally.⁷ As Simplicius writes, quoting Aristotle, Democritus “thinks that [atoms] cling to one another and remain together until some stronger necessity arriving from the environment scatters them apart and separates them.”⁸ Objects are contingent, but the elements that make up their substructure are eternal. For the atomists, matter is essentially inert or lifeless and its movement is regulated by purely mechanical laws external to the atoms themselves.⁹ If this were not the case the world of appearance would be completely contingent. Therefore, along with the inertia of matter they posit its subsistence in time and space.

Aristotle is critical of the limits of the atomistic account of knowledge that posits the identity of knowledge and sensation.¹⁰ In Democritus’ account, sensation is essentially reduced to touch: “Democritus and most of the natural philosophers... proceed quite irrationally, for they represent all objects of sense as objects of Touch. Yet, if this is really so, it clearly follows that each of the other senses is a mode of Touch; but one can see at a glance that this is impossible.”¹¹ Objects are composed by groups of atoms joined through touch and, equally, enter into the mind by way of touch so that sight becomes a form of touching between the sensing mind and the object, albeit at the atomic level. All knowledge of objects appears based on a limited form of sensation. However, while Democritus stresses the important role of sensation, he is also emphatic in distinguishing sensation from the *true knowledge* of an object: “In reality we know nothing—for truth is in the depths.”¹² Or, equally, “We in reality know nothing firmly but only as it changes in accordance with the condition of the body and of the things which enter it and to the

⁷ The eternal and unchanging nature of matter is, perhaps, the most enduring legacy of atomism. Kant, as I show in section 1.3, adopts the principle of *inertia* and *persistence* as the basis for rational scientific inquiry.

⁸ Barnes, ed. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2: 2446. This comes from Simplicius who quotes from Aristotle’s *On Democritus*, a text that has been lost.

⁹ Friedrich Albert Lange, *History of materialism and critique of its present importance: Volume 1*, trans. Ernest Chester Thomas. (London: Routledge, 2001). 3-4ff1. For Lange, only atomism provides the basis for rational scientific inquiry into nature: “The distinction... between the soul-atoms and the warm air of Diogenes of Appolonia, despite all the superficial similarity, is of quite fundamental importance. The latter in an absolute Reason-stuff (*Vernunftstoff*): it is capable in-itself of sensation, and its movements, such as they are, are due to its rationality. Demokritos’ [sic] soul-atoms move, like all other atoms according to purely mechanical principles and produce the phenomenon of thinking beings only in a special combination mechanically brought about.” I will examine this problem in greater detail when I come to hylozoism later in this section and in section 1.3 where I discuss Kant’s criticisms of hylozoism.

¹⁰ Barnes, ed. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2: 1593-4.

¹¹ Aristotle, *On Sense and the Sensible*, (Adelaide: eBooks@Adelaide, 2007), <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/sense/>.

¹² Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek philosophy*. (London: Penguin Classics, 1987). 224.

things which resist it."¹³ Finally, combining the first and second quotes, Democritus makes a distinction between sense and understanding: "There are two forms of knowledge, one genuine and the other dark. To the dark belong all these: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. The genuine separated from this <...>."¹⁴ The genuine is *the real*, knowledge of the material world while the dark, *the conventional*, is sensuousness. Despite the fact that objects are constituted materially and grasped sensuously, Democritus makes a fundamental distinction between a genuine world of true knowledge and the world of sensuous convention. Or, in other words, he marks a distinction between *essence* as truth and *appearance* as mere semblance. Truth, in any meaningful sense, is permanently bracketed from the reality of sensuous appearance because it exists squarely outside of sensation. The subject only has access to sensation which, as Democritus states, is embodied and, as such, contingent and subjective. Despite the fact we are dealing with matter instead of essences or ideas, for Democritus, there remains an ontologically separate genuine world behind the conventional world of subjective and contingent appearance.

For Aristotle, atomism can never adequately account for truth: "[D]emocritus, at any rate, says that either there is no truth or to us at least it is not evident. And in general it is because these thinkers suppose knowledge to be sensation, and this to be a physical alteration, that they say what appears to our senses must be true."¹⁵ Atomism, despite its claim that the atom is permanent, results in a form of scepticism in regards to knowledge: the object as an object of sense—the conventional—is unreliable. In light of this, Aristotle identifies that a form of epistemological scepticism is central to Democritean atomism. Reality is, then, for Democritus, *appearance* while the atom is *essence*.¹⁶ As Karl Marx writes in his doctoral dissertation, "Democritus considers the properties of the atom only in relation to the formation of the differences in the world of appearances, and not in relation to the atom itself."¹⁷ The atom contains no properties and is, therefore, *abstract* and *empty*.¹⁸ The material substrate is eternal while the world of appearance is in a state of constant change. The foundation of the mechanistic account of the atom is one of inertia and the persistence of matter. Such a theory runs in opposition to the dynamism and contingency

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 225.

¹⁵ Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*: 1594.

¹⁶ This will play an important part for the neo-Kantian critique of metaphysical materialism that I examine in 1.3 and 1.4.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Marx and Engels Collected Works: Volume 1*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 55.

¹⁸ Ibid., 61.

of the world of objects or appearances. Further, the atomistic account of sensation remains incomplete. For Aristotle, “sensation is surely not the sensation of itself, but there is something beyond the sensation, which must be prior to the sensation; for that which moves is prior in nature to that which is moved.”¹⁹ Aristotle claims that the atomist’s account provides no *cause* for movement or sensation other than the mere chance external coincidence between atoms. The purely conventional world of objects is composed of random combination of individual atoms compelled by negative movement within a vacuum. Atomism cannot provide a compelling case for the cause of this movement since atoms themselves provide the substructure of the world. The cause would have to be either the atoms themselves or a force or movement that lies beyond experience and sensation. Such an account contradicts a purely mechanistic form of materialism since it indicates that atoms themselves have a level of agency that goes against the materialist claim that the material substrate of reality—its essence—is inert.

Democritean atomism cannot provide the basis for a convincing materialist conception of reality because it is ultimately sceptical about the reliability of sensation. If sensation is to be the chief criterion of its epistemology, Democritean atomism alone cannot be an appropriate ground since it is not sensation, but the atom—a concept that lies completely beyond sensation—that is the essence of reality. At its heart, atomism posits the necessity of further investigation into the system of nature in order to reveal its foundation. Classical atomism must continually fall short until it can be assisted by development of the natural sciences, particularly physics. While classical atomism provides the foundation of the *causal theory of sensation*, this position cannot be fully developed until the scientific revolution precipitated by the scientific discoveries of Galileo and Descartes. It is in Galileo, as Alexandre Koyrè asserts, “that the idea of mathematical physics, or rather the idea of the mathematisation of the physical, was realised for the first time in the history of human thought.”²⁰ With the movement away from the *experiential* and *experimental* nature of classical physics towards a mathematical and mechanical model of nature the systemisation of nature becomes possible. In other words, for modern physics the gulf between sensation or experience and science is not the unbridgeable gulf it was for Democritus. It is also at this point that the true usefulness of the atom becomes apparent: it is an essentially empty, abstract, and individual unit that can be generalised across the whole of material reality.

¹⁹ *Aristotle Complete Works: Volume 2*: 1596.

²⁰ Alexandre Koyrè, *Galileo Studies*, trans. John Meapham. (Amsterdam: Brill, 1978), 201.

This unit corresponds to materialism's two chief claims: first, that reality can be reduced to the interaction of material forces—*atoms*; and, second, that consciousness is the result of a material process—*sensation*.

Atomism makes two other significant claims that will come to represent the foundation for later scientific inquiry into reality: First, that *reality* is a conventional world of appearances containing a real material substrate; and, second, that the material substrate—the essence—is *inert* while the world of appearances is *dynamic*. I examine these claims in further detail when I come to Kant's philosophy in 1.2. I will now move on to *hylozoism*, the vitalistic counterpart to atomism. Examining hylozoism is necessary in order to come to a full understanding of materialism in both its mechanistic and vitalistic forms. Looking at hylozoism will also provide an opportunity to test whether or not it breaks the materialist criteria given above.

1.2 Hylozoism and Vitalistic Materialism

The Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth coins the term hylozoism in his 1678 text, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*. The etymology of the term is the Greek *hylo* (ὕλο) meaning matter and *zoe* (ζωή) meaning life. It should be noted that hylozoism is a term that is retroactively applied to a variety of positions. In his book, *Panpsychism in the West*, David Skrbina argues that this term “carries a negative connotation in modern literature and is frequently used as a vague disparagement of Greek philosophy.”²¹ While Cudworth uses hylozoism as a pejorative, he treats both hylozoism and atomism equally as the foundational atheistic positions. It is important to note, therefore, that Cudworth is not attacking Greek philosophy as such, but its modern representatives Hobbes—on the side of atomism—and Spinoza—on the side of hylozoism. Cudworth's charge of atheism against both hylozoism and atomism is not based on a disparagement of Greek philosophy, but on the philosophical grounds that, when driven to their logical extreme, atomism and hylozoism result in the denial of the existence of God. For Cudworth, this occurs because both, either implicitly or explicitly, reject the notion that matter is formed according to a teleological principle.

²¹ Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West*: 34.

Cudworth describes nature for the hylozoist as “a piece of very mysterious nonsense, a thing perfectly wise, without any knowledge or consciousness of itself.”²² Cudworth contrasts Democritus’ atomism from the hylozoism of Strato of Lampsacus. Unlike Democritus, Strato is not a pre-Socratic. He studied under Aristotle and was inspired by his natural philosophy.²³ He believed that Aristotle’s insights into the natural world could be harmonised with the atomistic account of nature. Strato’s hylozoism surpasses both the inert atomistic account and the simplistic pantheistic account of nature held by the pre-Socratics. In this light, Cudworth shows the difference between Strato and Democritus: “Democritus’s nature was nothing but the fortuitous motion of matter; but Strato’s nature was an inward plastic life in the several parts of matter, whereby they could artificially frame themselves to the best advantage, according to their several capabilities, without any conscious or reflexive knowledge”²⁴

Hylozoism does not attribute subjectivity to the atom in the same sense as panpsychism since it does not attribute reflexive or conscious knowledge to matter. However, hylozoism still risks reflecting the artificial or conventional activity of human beings onto the material world. In doing so, it risks becoming a form of *anthropomorphism*. As such, violates both the principle of *inertia* and *persistence of matter*. These principles form the basis of materialism and also the later Kantian conception of the system of nature, as I show later in this chapter. The risk, from the perspective of the Kantian and materialist standpoint, is that hylozoism implicitly posits an immaterial force or mover behind its organisation of matter that cannot be accounted for from within experience (materialism) or rational scientific inquiry (Kantianism).

The question is, then, precisely how, using Cudworth’s turn of phrase, matter can frame itself to its best advantage. If objects cannot be formed on the basis of any sort of reason contained in the atoms themselves does hylozoism offer anything more substantial than the mechanical atomist account of the combination of atoms? On the surface it appears that both hylozoism and atomism—though disagreeing on the precise structure of the atom—share the same fundamental assumption: objects are formed on the basis of the chance external encounter between atoms rather than by any sort of overarching reason or

²² Ralph Cudworth, *The true intellectual system of the universe*. (London: J.F. Dove, 1820). 236.

²³ Eduard Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, trans. Sarah Frances Alleyne & Evelyn Abbott. (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1931), 164.

²⁴ Cudworth, *The true intellectual system of the universe*: 240.

teleology. The chief claim of both hylozoism and atomism is that matter is the foundation of all being. Strictly speaking, then, both hylozoism and atomism meet the criteria of materialism given above. Thus, it is possible to remain a consistent materialist while, at the same time, violating the grounds of rational scientific inquiry into the natural world, i.e. the law of inertia and persistence of matter. As both potentially anthropomorphic and speculative, hylozoism poses a problem for scientific inquiry into the natural world, so much so that Kant went so far as to declare hylozoism to be “the death of *Naturphilosophie*”. It is at this point that the status of hylozoism becomes questionable and it is quite fitting that this is the point at which Kant’s critique of hylozoism begins.

1.3 Kant and Materialism

The founder of English Romanticism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, gives a blunt diagnosis of hylozoism that echoes Kant: “The hypothesis of Hylozoism... is the death of all rational physiology, and indeed of all physical science; for that requires a limitation of terms, and cannot consist with the arbitrary power of multiplying attributes by occult qualities.”²⁵ In other words, hylozoism relies on claims that cannot be proven in experience and any form on inquiry that relies on hylozoism merely reproduces its faulty insights. Coleridge’s attitude towards hylozoism can be traced directly back to Kant, as I will now demonstrate. Kant’s philosophy represents a point of no return for materialism—all subsequent materialisms and natural philosophies must address a particular question posed by Kantian philosophy: if nature is governed by mechanical causal laws, do these same laws apply to the realm of organised beings?

This section begins by looking at Kant’s critique of hylozoism before moving onto an examination of the broader implications that Kant’s critical philosophy has for materialism. Kant has a consistent critique of hylozoism that spans both his pre-critical and critical works. Before examining this argument in further depth I will examine Kant’s objection to hylozoism in light of his pre-critical writings on the subject and, from there, move onto look at the implications of Kant’s opposition to hylozoism for materialism. Kant’s opposition to hylozoism along with some ambiguities in his account of intuition

²⁵ S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia literaria; or, biographical sketches of my literary life and opinions*. (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1834). 81.

open the door for a materialist inflected misreading of Kant that I find in the German physicist and early neo-Kantian, Hermann von Helmholtz. It is the Kantian philosophy that frames the debate between the metaphysical materialists and neo-Kantians in the mid to late nineteenth century, something that I discuss in the sections that follow. At the same time, Kant's influence on the further development of materialism, specifically materialist epistemology, cannot be underestimated. Despite the fact that Kant's aim was to advance a form of transcendental idealism, he makes a fundamental contribution to all future forms of materialism.²⁶ Kantian critical philosophy represents a point of no return for materialism: the very nature of materialism changes after Kant's so-called Copernican Revolution. I will now move to examine Kant's critique of hylozoism.

As I noted in section 1.2, Kant makes reference to hylozoism in the pre-critical text, "Dreams of spirit-seer elucidated by dreams of metaphysics". There, Kant contrasts two different scientific methods: the *vitalistic* method of Georg Ersnt Stahl and *mechanical* method of Hermann Boerhaave and Friedrich Hoffmann. Kant gives a half-hearted defence of Stahl who "was frequently closer to the truth than *Hofmann* [*sic*] or *Boerhaave*."²⁷ Stahl proposed that matter had a vital force whereas Hoffmann and Boerhaave "ignoring immaterial forces, adhere to mechanical causes, and in doing so adopt a more philosophical method. This method, while sometimes failing of its mark, is generally successful. It is also this method alone which is of use to science."²⁸ Kant, sees some promise in Stahl's organic explanations, but ultimately sides with the mechanical method because it does not make a speculative appeal to immaterial principles, which Kant calls "the resort of lazy philosophy."²⁹ The critique of hylozoism echoes throughout Kant's philosophy, so much so that Alberto Toscano describes hylozoism as Kant's "biophilosophical nemesis".³⁰ I will

²⁶ Lucio Colletti, "A political and philosophical interview," *New Left Review* I, no. 86 (1974): 10. This is the line of argument taken by Lucio Colletti: "[F]rom a strictly epistemological point of view, there is only one great modern thinker who can be of assistance to us in constructing a materialist theory of knowledge—Immanuel Kant." Colletti is sympathetic to the neo-Kantian reading of Kantian philosophy that emphasises the importance of epistemological and methodological problems. These are the aspects of Kant's thought that are developed by Otto Liebmann, Hermann Lotze, Hermann von Helmholtz and Friedrich Albert Lange. I restrict my discussion in this chapter to the work of Helmholtz and Lange. For an extensive discussion of Hermann Lotze's contributions to neo-Kantianism see Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*. (London: Verso, 2009). 6-10.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical philosophy 1755-1770*, trans. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). 319.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

³⁰ Alberto Toscano, *The Theatre of Production: Philosophy and Individuation between Kant and Deleuze*. (London: Palgrave, 2006), 36.

now turn to a chronological examination of the points at which Kant discusses hylozoism in his critical philosophy in order to uncover his systematic critique of hylozoism.

In Kant's 1755 text, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, he argues for the mechanistic structure of the universe. Michael Friedman calls Kant's conception of nature at this stage *physico-theology*.³¹ In short, in this text Kant claims that the mechanistic explanation of the laws of nature act as the best proof of a divine origin of the universe: it is God who endows nature with the fundamental laws. Or, in Kant's words,

This divine wisdom has organized everything so beneficially for the advantage of sensible beings who inhabit the planets. But how would we now reconcile the concept of intentionality with a mechanical theory, so that what the Highest Wisdom has itself devised is assigned to raw material stuff and the rule of providence is turned over to nature left to act on its own?³²

The answer, for Kant, is that rational inquiry into nature will reveal that:

the universal ways in which things are made are not strange and separate from each other. We will be sufficiently convinced that they have essential connections, through which they are coordinated, to support each other in providing a more perfect state... and that, in general, the single natures of things in the field of universal truths already make up amongst themselves, so to speak, a system, in which one is related to another.³³

The fundamental laws of nature are provided by a divine intelligence and nature regulates itself on the basis of these laws. Harmony is not pre-established externally by a divine artifice, but, instead, occurs on the basis of a system regulated by natural laws. These laws comprise *the system of nature*.³⁴ In this light, rational scientific inquiry into the natural world will provide human beings with a greater understanding that, in turn, reveals a deeper

³¹ See Michael Friedman, *Kant and the exact sciences*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). 10-11. Physico-theology should be seen in contrast to the Leibnizian-Wolffian doctrine of pre-established harmony. In §7 of Leibniz's *Monadology*, the monad is described as "windowless" and "neither substance nor accident can enter a monad from without." As Friedman claims, Kant did not dismiss the notion of harmony, but rather claims that there is a "real physical influx" governed by physical laws in contrast to the Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy of the *pre-established harmony* that views God employing the "craftsman's artifice" to establish harmony among monads.

³² Immanuel Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, trans. Ian Johnston (Arlington: Richer Resources Publications, 2008). 141-2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical foundations of natural science*, trans. Michael Friedman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). 84. In the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, Kant relates a *system*—"a whole of cognition [*Erkennen*] ordered according to principles"—to *science*. Proper science has to have apodictic certainty. Sciences that are merely empirical—Kant refers to chemistry in this light—can never reach the level of cognition. In order for science to be *rational*, it must be grounded systematically, universally, and contain apodictic certainty: "Any whole of cognition that is systematic... can already be called *science*, and, if this connection of cognition in this system is an interconnection of grounds and consequences, even *rational science*." Rational science requires an *a priori* part that can be asserted with apodictic certainty, which, for Kant are the *laws of mechanics*. An examination of the *a priori* laws of nature will provide an understanding of the connections that make up the totality of the system of nature.

relationship between the natural world and the spiritual realm.³⁵ Here, Kant rejects the view that nature is governed by immaterial forces that affect it externally, just as he does in the *Spirit-seer* essay. Instead, Kant claims that the natural world must be examined rationally as a system of laws and principles.

Two notable instances where Kant discusses hylozoism in the critical period occur in the 1786 text *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* [MFNS], published just before the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* [CPR], and the 1790 *Critique of Judgement*. In the MFNS, Kant offers a stronger critique than the one in the “Spirit-seer” essay, “The possibility of a proper natural science rests entirely and completely on the law of inertia (along with the persistence of substance). The opposite of this, and thus also the death of all natural philosophy, would be *hylozoism*.”³⁶ I will now look at these two principles in detail beginning with persistence.

Kant develops the philosophical importance of the *persistence of matter* in the “Refutation of Idealism” contained in the second edition of the CPR:

I am conscious of my existence as determined in time. All time determinations presuppose something *permanent* in perception. But this permanent something cannot be something within me, precisely because my existence can be determined in time only by this permanent something. Therefore perception of this permanent something is possible only through a *thing* outside me and not through mere *presentation* of a thing outside me.³⁷

For both scientific and philosophical inquiry, it is essential that there is something permanent and real, i.e. not mere *Vorstellung*, for perception to receive otherwise it cannot help but fall into a sceptical position.

Kant’s emphasis on the importance of the principle of *inertia* is equally important. He contrasts the *inertia* of matter with *life*, which Kant describes as “the faculty of a substance to determine itself to act from an internal principle.”³⁸ Matter lacks all internal determinations or grounds from internal determinations. Thus, change in matter cannot

³⁵ It should be noted that the *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* occupies an odd place in Kant’s corpus. It was quite controversial at the time, which led Kant to publish it anonymously. In addition, its influence remains underappreciated in the English-speaking world, as its absence, until 2012, from the Cambridge Kant Edition indicates. Despite this, however, this text had a decisive influence on German Romanticism, especially Herder who adopted the Kantian view that explanations based on natural laws are superior to those based on divine intervention and, in turn, constructed an anthropological theory of language based on Kant’s a notion of *natural history*.

³⁶ Kant, *Metaphysical foundations of natural science*: 84.

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996). Pluhar translates *Vorstellung* as presentation.

³⁸ Kant, *Metaphysical foundations of natural science*: 83.

occur internally—as hylozoism suggests—but must occur on the basis of an external cause.³⁹ For Kant, substances—complexes of matter—can change on the basis on an internal principle, but its constitutive material substrate is made up of inert individual particles of matter. These particles do not have the ability to act on the basis of an internal principle, because, if that were the case, the existence of objects would be entirely contingent. This would contradict the law of persistence and generally contradict sense-experience.

Kant's methodological criticism of hylozoism is further developed in the “Critique of Teleological Judgement” in the *Critique of Judgement*. Here, Kant links the scientific account of matter with a methodological critique of hylozoism: “There must... be a circle in the explanation if one would derive the purposiveness of nature in organized beings from the life of matter and in turn is not acquainted with this life otherwise in organized beings, and thus cannot form any concept of its possibility without experience of them. *Hylozoism thus does not accomplish what it promises.*”⁴⁰ Hylozoism possesses an essential deficit: it endows matter with a property that contradicts its essence.⁴¹ Matter, as I have shown, is inert for Kant and, therefore, hylozoism *falsely reflects the activity of life onto inert matter*.⁴²

Kant adds a third element to his criticism of hylozoism in the *Critique of Judgement*: mechanical explanations can never explain the whole of an organised being. Kant is crystal clear on this point: “For it is quite certain that we can never adequately come to know the organised beings and their internal possibility in accordance with merely mechanical principles of nature, let alone explain them.”⁴³ This is entirely consistent with the pre-critical *Universal Natural History*:

³⁹ Ibid. Kant links persistence and lifelessness together: “Now we know no other internal principle in a substance for changing its state except desiring, and no other internal activity at all except thinking, together with that which depends on it, the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and desire or willing. But these actions and grounds of determinations in no way belong to the representations of the outer senses, and so neither [do they belong] to the determinations of matter as matter. Hence, all matter, as such, is lifeless.”

⁴⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the power of judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 267. [My emphasis]

⁴¹ Ibid., 246.

⁴² See Friedman, *Kant and the exact sciences*: 50f87. As Michael Friedman claim, Kant consistently retains the notion that biological phenomena are not fully comprehensible mechanically throughout his pre-critical and critical philosophy. I would add to Friedman, based on the quote above from the *CoJ* that this rule applies the other way around as well: you cannot apply the rules of biological phenomena onto objects governed by mechanical laws. There seems, therefore, to be an implicit division between the *organic realm* of organised life and the *mechanical realm* that underlies objects.

⁴³ Kant, *Critique of the power of judgement*: §75/270.

[W]e will be able to understand the development of all the cosmic bodies, the causes of their movements, in short, the origin of the entire present arrangement of the planetary system, before we completely and clearly understand the development of a single plant or caterpillar on mechanical principles.⁴⁴

This is one of Kant's most unique contributions to the relationship between science and philosophy: while he accepts, and even grounds his philosophy on, the principles of the exact sciences, he also places strict limits on their application. Thus, Kant claims that the attempt to apply mechanical principles to organised beings is inherently problematic. Kant, therefore, makes a strong distinction between the *inertia* or *lifelessnessness* of matter, on the one hand, and the *life* of active organised beings, on the other.

In conclusion, Kant's critique of hylozoism rests: first, the persistence of an inert material substance; and, second, the absolute separation of *life* or *activity* and *matter* or *inertia*. Kant, therefore, offers a two-fold critique of hylozoism: 1) Hylozoism contradicts both the law of *inertia* and *persistence*; and, 2) The argument for hylozoism rests on a circular argument that transposes the a posteriori experience of organised life onto matter. Argument (1) is the *scientific argument* and (2) is the *methodological argument* against hylozoism. In some sense, Kant wants to have it both ways. On the one hand, he wants to maintain the laws of inertia and persistence as the metaphysical basis for scientific inquiry while, on the other hand, maintaining a strict separation between the *realm of organised beings* and a *natural world of sensation* regulated by mechanical laws.⁴⁵ This separation, however, serves an important purpose within the Kantian philosophy: first, it avoids the reduction of the behaviour and interaction organised beings to a set of mechanical laws; second, it allows unlimited inquiry into the natural world without violating the freedom of the organised realm of human beings.

Kant places a limit on the extension of mechanical principles in order to guarantee the integrity and freedom of the organised realm of human beings. This is the uniqueness

⁴⁴ Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*: 16.

⁴⁵ See Kant, *Metaphysical foundations of natural science*: 75-85. In the MFNS, Kant lays out his laws of mechanics that, at least superficially, look identical to Newton's three laws. While often treated as identical to Newton's laws recent work has developed how Kant's conception of the laws of nature was influenced by both Newtonian mechanics and post-Liebnizian rationalism. For instance, Kant, in the MFNS, distinguishes his conception of the "law of the equality of action and reaction" from Newton: "*Newton* by no means dared to prove this law a priori, and therefore appealed rather to experience." Even Newton has to appeal to experience and, therefore, his law lacked the Kantian criterion of apodicticity. For an excellent account of both the Newtonian and post-Liebnizian context of Kant's MFNS see, Michael Friedman, *Kant's Construction of Nature: A Reading of the Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

of the Kantian position: he is able to avoid the metaphysical excess of hylozoism, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, refuting the validity of the materialist claim that the mechanical account of nature can be applied to the free realm of organised beings. However, Kant ultimately posits a necessary, but implicit separation between two kinds of nature: first, a so-called *first nature* subject to mechanical laws discovered by mathematical physics; and, second, a human or *second nature* which is not. It is this ambiguity that opens the door for a new form of metaphysical scientific materialism that helps to lay the groundwork for the neo-Kantian ‘return to Kant’.

1.4 Scientific Materialism and the Origins of neo-Kantianism

I will now show how a group of materialist philosophers and scientists—classified under the umbrella term *metaphysical materialists*—tried to address a set of problems they perceived in Kantian idealism. *Scientific materialism* is a particularly post-Kantian form of materialism insofar as it attempts to deal with the problem of epistemological scepticism that they claim is posed by the Kantian conception of the *thing-in-itself*. In order to grasp the neo-Kantian position that emerges in post-Kantian philosophy a proper understanding of its relationship to scientific materialism is necessary. As Fredrick Gregory claims, “it was the superficial philosophical position of scientific materialism which caused the return to epistemological questions at mid-century in Germany.”⁴⁶ In light of this claim, it is clear that scientific materialism, more than any other philosophy including Hegel’s idealism, sets the grounds for neo-Kantianism. By framing their philosophy in response to scientific materialism, neo-Kantianism orients itself around a particular set of epistemological problems. The central question for neo-Kantianism is: how can we acquire knowledge of reality and, in turn, how this knowledge can be grounded objectively. Knowledge, in this case, means scientific cognition that must satisfy Kant’s criteria of *objective universality* and *apodictic certainty*.

Neo-Kantianism accepts the charge of epistemological scepticism levelled against Kant by scientific materialism while, at the same time, attempting to rescue Kant’s critical philosophy from the charge of subjectivism. The result of this attempt is, in the case of

⁴⁶ Frederick Gregory, *Scientific materialism in nineteenth-century Germany*. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977). 31.

Helmholtz and Lange, whom I discuss in this chapter, a more physiological reading of the Kantian subject that allows the latest developments in natural science to be made compatible with a critically grounded theoretical philosophy. I will now move to an examination of scientific materialism in order to demonstrate how Helmholtz and Lange frame this problem.

Scientific materialism emerges as an attempt to overcome the limits set on knowledge by Kant's philosophy, particularly in regards to the *thing-in-itself*. In short, scientific materialism disputes the limits imposed by Kant on knowledge of things-in-themselves. Early neo-Kantianism can be seen as a defence of Kantian idealism against the encroachment of a strictly empiricist epistemology. Or, in other words, an approach to knowledge that reduces concepts and ideas to by-products of sensuous experience. As such, the debate between scientific materialism and neo-Kantianism is conducted on primarily epistemological grounds and it concerns the limits of knowledge and the proper role and application of the exact sciences to philosophical problems. The dominant scientific materialist thinkers were Karl Vogt, Jacob Moleschott, Ludwig Büchner and Heinrich Czolbe. These thinkers were united by two key factors: first, their use of a scientific method and, second, the self-conscious adoption of certain metaphysical presuppositions.

Gregory lays out the four main tenets of metaphysical materialism: "(1) that there is an independently existing world; (2) that human beings, like all other subjects, are material entities; (3) that the human mind does not exist as an entity distinct from the human body; (4) that there is no God (nor any other nonhuman being) whose mode of existence is not that of material entities."⁴⁷ What scientific materialism offers is a naturalistic philosophical system that dismisses the existence of any spiritual (non-natural) forces while retaining certain metaphysical presuppositions in order to permit the development of a systematic philosophical theory. Put simply, the aim of metaphysical materialism extended beyond one particular branch of science or a specific scientific problem to the whole of human

⁴⁷ Fredrick Gregory, *Scientific materialism in nineteenth-century Germany*: X-XI. Gregory notes that it is important to separate the metaphysical materialists from the biological mechanists who explained organic phenomena purely mechanistically, thereby removing the need for explanations based on a vital force. As Gregory astutely suggests: "Since this approach was not intended to serve as a metaphysical explanation of life, they [the biological mechanists] cannot properly be called materialists at all." Metaphysical materialism, while making use of a scientific method, sought to explain more than a specific problem of biology: they wanted a systematic philosophy based on a certain set of metaphysical (albeit, materialist) principles that could be applied generally to all aspects of life.

existence.⁴⁸ I doing so, they encompass within their system of philosophy both the realms of nature and human organization.

Scientific materialism was particularly dissatisfied with what it saw as Kant's epistemological scepticism and the *a priori* nature of the transcendental categories of experience. Generally, they hold, against Kant, that the only source of knowledge is sensuous experience.⁴⁹ For Büchner, Kant and Kantians conceived of time and space as "mere subjective forms of our thought or preconceived *a priori* ideas, which we bring with us into nature." In contrast, metaphysical materialism claims that time and space are constituted by nature and derived from experience. Thus, in contrast to the Kantian account, that sees space and time as 'pure a priori intuitions' that cannot be derived from either sensibility or understanding, Büchner appears to embrace the empiricist and pre-Kantian view that space and time are derived from sense experience. Further, for Büchner, the idea that an object *in-itself* differs from its presentation in thought is a non-issue: "There is no visible reason whatever why nature should deceive man... We may take a photograph of an object, a rose, for instance. It would be impossible for this photograph to evoke the same presentation in our brain as the original, if the presentation was not a fairly correct interpreter of reality."⁵⁰ Objects are known through experience and it is this experience that should be the starting point. For Büchner, idealism, in contrast, begins from an admission of ignorance.⁵¹

Metaphysical materialism objected to Kant's treatment of the *thing-in-itself* as the last refuge of a form of thinking that held onto the unknown and, in doing so, permanently sundered the identity of subject and object. In contrast, scientific materialism claimed it could overcome the antithesis of subject and object in both thought and in reality. This is

⁴⁸ Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, trans. J.H. Bridges (London: George Routledge & Sons, Limited, 1907). 54-8. It is important to distinguish metaphysical materialism from *positivism*. Czolbe, for example, was quite enthusiastic about Auguste Comte's positivist program, particularly his insistence that the scientific method could be applied to more than just the natural world. Comte's positivism, in its assertion of the universality of positive science, is closer to a form of neo-Kantianism. Comte, himself, criticises metaphysical materialism: "They not unfrequently [*sic*] attempt, for instance, to explain all sociological facts by the influence of climate and race, which are purely secondary; thus showing their ignorance of the fundamental laws of Sociology, which can only be discovered by a series of direct inductions from history." As I will show later in this chapter, this is the same error that Lange attributes to metaphysical materialism.

⁴⁹ See Gregory, *Scientific materialism in nineteenth-century Germany*: 147. As Gregory claims, scientific materialism held a naïve realist position that they contrasted with what they saw as the "subjective idealism" of the post-Kantian tradition.

⁵⁰ Ludwig Büchner, *Last Words on Materialism and Kindred Subjects*, trans. Joseph McCabe. (London: Watts & Co., 1901), 269.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 148. As Büchner states, "Knowledge and not admission of ignorance is the true goal of science."

possible for the scientific materialists because of the emphasis they placed on the role of *natural causality*. Czolbe and Büchner, for example, held that that *causality* and *rationality* were equivalent. As Büchner states, “[t]he reason in nature is also the reason in thought” and, through this, posited “the identity of the laws of thought with the mechanical laws of external nature.”⁵² The causal relationships at the basis of the natural world, which are inherently rational, can be seen as the grounds for all forms of knowledge. These laws can be generalised and applied beyond scientific knowledge to all aspects of organised life, most notably to society. Further, these laws benefit from the fact that they are gathered purely from sense experience. *Things-in-themselves* are, therefore, not off limits insofar as they are part of the same causal nexus as everything else. The subject, by its rational nature, is in harmony with nature as a system of mechanical laws. Conceived in this way, nature is not conceived of as beyond the subject since the subject and nature are part of the same causal nexus. If there is no essential conflict between the subject’s experience and nature, there is no inherent problem in beginning from immediate sense experience.

In light of this position, Büchner and other metaphysical materialists were criticised for being naïve realists. For his part, Büchner did not really dispute this charge since his philosophy was critical of what he saw was the ‘subjective idealism’ of post-Kantian philosophy. This subjective idealism was, for Büchner, “a one-sided antiquated long-abandoned philosophic standpoint”.⁵³ What Büchner and the other scientific materialists found objectionable in Kant and post-Kantian philosophy was the deep-seated hostility towards sensation. As materialists, this did not pose a problem. As Büchner stated in the quote above, we should begin from experience or, in other words, begin with the subject’s perception of the object. In his attempt to bridge an account of perception with Kantian idealism, the German physicist and philosopher Hermann von Helmholtz occupies an interesting position between scientific materialism and Kantian philosophy. Helmholtz comes to frame many of the issues that will be taken up by Friedrich Albert and other neo-Kantians. The most notable of these presuppositions, is his signal theory of perception. The signal theory of perception will be a consistent characteristic of neo-Kantianism through Lange to Cohen and Rickert.

⁵² Ibid., 156-7.

⁵³ Büchner, *Last Words on Materialism and Kindred Subjects*: 269.

Helmholtz' position in regards to perception is best summed up in his 1853 lecture, "On Goethe's Scientific Researches". Unlike scientific materialism, for Helmholtz, the sense-organs do not produce immediate knowledge of an object.

"[O]ur sensations are for us only *signs* [*Zeichen*] of the objects of the external world, and correspond to them only in some such way as written characters or articulate words to the things they denote. They give us, it is true, information respecting the properties of things without us, but no better information than we give a blind man about colour by verbal descriptions."⁵⁴

Perception does not provide images of things, but impressions of things or signs. As such, access to reality only occurs through representation. Helmholtz, therefore, accepts the scientific account of the physiology of the senses, but disputes the validity of generalizing that account in the manner of scientific materialism. Further, unlike the metaphysical materialists, he makes a distinction between psychic and physical processes. Helmholtz never gave up this view, which can be seen as foundational for neo-Kantianism. In an 1879 lecture, "The Aim and Progress of Physical Science", he describes nature as "independent of our thought and will."⁵⁵ Helmholtz admits that the senses are a sufficient source of scientific cognition, but that they do not provide knowledge of *things-in-themselves*. For Helmholtz, the image of an object is analogous to the original; sensation offers a representation of an object, but does not provide a direct copy of it. Sensations are "merely signs of changes taking place in the external world and can be regarded only as pictures in that they represent succession in time."⁵⁶

It is in this light that Helmholtz criticises Goethe from the point of view of the *inductive scientific method*. For Helmholtz, Goethe approaches natural philosophy in the same way he would a poem: "In writing a poem, he has been accustomed to look, as it were, *right into the subject*, and to reproduce his intuition without formulating any of the steps that led him to it... Such is the fashion in which he would have Nature attacked."⁵⁷ Accordingly, Goethe is not concerned with the causal connections behind natural phenomena, but merely with the final result, the presentation of the object *in-itself*. In doing so, he remains at the level of *appearances*.

⁵⁴ Hermann von Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures on Scientific Subjects*, trans. E. Atkinson (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881). 45.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 345. Helmholtz follows Kant insofar as sensibility deals with appearances. However, as I will show, Helmholtz attempts to modify Kant's metaphysical account of experience with one rooted in a scientific account of the physiology of the sense organs.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 45. [My emphasis]

In contrast to this *aesthetic* view, Helmholtz emphasises the law of causality that “expresses a trust in the *complete comprehensibility* of the world.”⁵⁸ Helmholtz’ admiration for Goethe lies in the fact that he was driven to “break a lance” with natural philosophy rather than fleeing from reality into subjectivity. However, Helmholtz could not endorse Goethe’s poetic approach to nature principally because it essentially renounces scientific knowledge of the natural world.⁵⁹ The following passage from Helmholtz, I believe, is indicative of the broader neo-Kantian attitude towards the natural world: “We must familiarise ourselves with its [nature’s] levers and pulleys, fatal though it be to poetic contemplation, in order to be able to govern them after our own free will, and therein lies the complete justification of physical investigation, and its vast importance for the advance of human civilisation.”⁶⁰ This attitude is in direct conflict with how Helmholtz characterises Goethe’s view that “[n]ature must reveal her secrets of her own free will; that she is but the transparent representation of the ideal world.”⁶¹ In other words, for Helmholtz, Goethe was a proponent of a view based on ‘artistic intuition’ that sees the direct expression of an idea in phenomena.⁶² For Helmholtz, however, as I noted above, the senses are merely inferential and, therefore, prone to error.⁶³ Proper knowledge of objects lies where Goethe, the artist, cannot go, the causal nexus underlying the natural world.

With this we see some parallels with scientific materialism, particularly a shared belief that *things-in-themselves* are not unknown. Helmholtz, however, does not side with a mechanistic worldview of scientific materialism. Rather, for him, causality drives thought forward breaking the hold of both *mechanism* and *vitalism*. The former reduces the appearance of an object to an underlying substance, such as the atom. The latter, views the underlying substance of the world as chaotic and in the process of constant change. For both mechanism and vitalism the advance of thought ceases: mechanism posits the

⁵⁸ Hermann von Helmholtz, *Epistemological Writings*, trans. Malcolm F. Lowe (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977). 142.

⁵⁹ Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures on Scientific Subjects*: 45. As Helmholtz states, “we cannot triumph over the machinery of matter by ignoring it; we can triumph over it only by subordinating it to the aims of our moral intelligence.”

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶³ Dani Hallett, "On the Subject of Goethe: Hermann von Helmholtz on Goethe and Scientific Objectivity," *Spontaneous Generations: A Journal for the History and Philosophy of Science* 3, no. 1 (2009): 190-1. The theory of signs should be seen as a counterpoint to seemingly direct access to objects provided by both artistic intuition and materialist epistemology. As Dani Hallett writes, “Helmholtz’s [*sic*] theory of signs was designed to deal with the concern of accurate epistemic access to the world while remaining true to findings in sensory physiology that revealed our cognitive-sensory apparatuses as potentially misleading.”

underlying substance as fundamentally unchanging while vitalism cannot discover any lawfulness in the chaos of becoming. Further, both posit something that is fundamentally outside of experience. In this light, mechanism and vitalism violate the scientific method: “An unconditional claim of this kind is something for which we never have a justification: this is allowed neither by the fact that our knowledge is full of gaps, nor by the nature of the inductive inferences upon which all our perception of the actual, from the first step onwards, is based.”⁶⁴ The scientific method naturally harmonises with the law of causality that, Helmholtz claims, is a transcendental law of experience. In other words, for Helmholtz, the inductive scientific method is embedded *a priori* in human experience.⁶⁵

For Helmholtz, complete comprehensibility of the world, as I have shown above, cannot come solely from sensation since it only provides a mere representation of the object qua sign. Helmholtz accepts the Kantian problem of the *thing-in-itself* as the epistemological problem *par excellence*.⁶⁶ The scientific materialist answer—the reduction of everything to mechanical laws—did not overcome this epistemological problem, because it did not address either the gaps in knowledge that sensuous experience could not fill and, more importantly, the inductive nature of thought. Mechanics obscures the true nature of thought that aims to “ascend to something more and more generally and inclusively lawlike.”⁶⁷ Lawlikeness is, for Helmholtz, the trust in the complete comprehensibility of the world. Simply positing an abstract concept, as mechanics does, causes thought to cease and become dogmatic. Only the advance of thought based on the inductive method—which trusts in lawlike behaviour—can achieve complete comprehensibility.⁶⁸

Helmholtz distances himself from scientific materialism by putting their empiricism up for question. Despite his trust in the complete comprehensibility of the world, there remains a boundary between the *thing-in-itself* and phenomena: if sensation can only provide a representation of an object rather than a direct copy, then the accuracy and reliability of sensation cannot be presupposed. In this light, the epistemological question takes

⁶⁴ Helmholtz, *Epistemological Writings*: 141.

⁶⁵ See *ibid.*, 181. Helmholtz’ use of *a priori* and transcendental differs from Kant. In the notes to this volume Moritz Schlick clarifies this issue: “In using the words *a priori* Helmholtz wants merely to state that the principle of causality cannot be gathered from experience by induction, but instead must already be presupposed in the interpretation of experience.” Helmholtz’ own motto for the presupposition of the law of causality, “have trust and act!”, begs the question of whether this law itself acts as a metaphysical presupposition.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ I will show, when I come to Lange in the final section of this chapter, that he accepts a scientific method based on induction.

precedence: how can we obtain knowledge of objects? Helmholtz rejects both the naïve realism and the mechanism of scientific materialism as dogmatically metaphysical. For him, as I have shown, science had to come to an understanding of the laws of causality and of the correspondence of nature to these laws. Only by understanding the lawlikeness of nature can we guarantee the accuracy of sensation. Beginning with sensation can never guarantee complete comprehensibility. In light of this, Helmholtz had to reckon with the uncertainty of sense data while attempting to construct an epistemology based on the physiology of the senses.

What Helmholtz offers, then, is a rather delicate balance between an account of sensation based on a form of signal representation and the demand for an epistemology that can achieve complete comprehensibility. This offers little certainty in comparison to the iron laws of mechanical materialism, as Helmholtz recognises: “We could live in a world in which every atom was different from every other one, and where there was nothing at rest. Then there would be no regularity of any kind to be found, and our thought activity would have to be at a standstill.”⁶⁹ Helmholtz, like Kant, identifies inertia as the proper grounds of science. If matter is not conceived of as inert the advance of thought must cease since it lacks a stable ground for its determinations. For causality to have any explanatory force matter must be essentially inert, even if the phenomena changes. As he writes, “Cause, according to the original meaning of the word, is the unchangeable residue or being behind the changing phenomena, namely, substance and the law of its action, force.”⁷⁰ Helmholtz, therefore, mixes an idealist account of signal representation with an effectively mechanical materialist position in regards to the inertia of matter and the demand for the complete comprehensibility of the natural world.

In conclusion, Helmholtz is, perhaps, more consistently Kantian than it initially appears. In a sense, he adopts the same scientific method as metaphysical materialism while rejecting the manner in which scientific materialism comes to generalise its method across the field of philosophy. It is on this point that Helmholtz comes closest to Kant:

In short, there is no denying that, while the moral sciences deal directly with the nearest and dearest interests of the human mind, and with the institutions it has brought into being, the natural sciences are concerned with dead, indifferent matter, obviously

⁶⁹ Helmholtz, *Epistemological Writings*: 142.

⁷⁰ Quoted from V.I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* in *Lenin Collected Works: Volume 14*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 272.

<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/mec/four6.htm>>

indispensable for the sake of its practical utility, but apparently without any immediate bearing on the cultivation of the intellect.⁷¹

In other words, scientific materialism errs when it attempts to apply the causal laws of mechanics to society—the realm of freedom. And, as I noted above, it is equally problematic to apply the laws of organised beings onto dead matter. These two aspects of science—the natural and the human—must be cultivated equally, but separately as two aspects of spirit. Helmholtz follows Kant separation of freedom and necessity in his critique of metaphysical materialism. In the end, he aims for a position that allows for the unlimited investigation into the laws of the natural world to continue without violating the integrity of free organised beings by hypostasising the mechanical laws of nature.

With all of that said, Helmholtz undoubtedly offers a specific reading of Kant that emphasises his empiricist tendencies and conceives of the subject in a strictly physiological sense. As an attempt to mediate between critical philosophy and scientific materialism, Helmholtz offers what could at best be called a quasi-Kantian philosophy. Helmholtz' claim—that philosophy should be oriented around primarily epistemological questions—is taken up by later neo-Kantianism. In his response to metaphysical materialism, Helmholtz sets up a specific reading of Kant that in many ways reacts to the problematic set up by metaphysical materialism in regards to epistemological questions. Further, Helmholtz' conception of philosophy puts the centrality of its role into question, particularly the philosopher's input into the epistemological problem that Helmholtz brings to the fore. It appears that, for Helmholtz, philosophy must move according to the inductive scientific method. In other words, insofar as questions of epistemology are concerned, philosophy must be harmonized with the exact sciences. The dispute between Helmholtz' idealism and metaphysical materialism does not really occur on philosophical, but on interpretive grounds in relation to the physiology of the senses. Does this render philosophy superfluous? It is in light of these problems that I turn to Friedrich Albert Lange, who in his history of materialism develops an idealist standpoint (his *standpoint of the ideal*) that retains the epistemological certainty of Helmholtz' philosophy while attempting to reassert the centrality of philosophical idealism.

⁷¹ Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures on Scientific Subjects*: 8.

1.5 Friedrich Albert Lange's *History of Materialism*

Lange sums up the both the benefits and the problems of materialism succinctly in the closing pages of his history: "As opposed to metaphysical imaginations, which make pretensions to penetrate the essence of nature and to determine from pure notions what only experience can teach us, Materialism as a counterpose is therefore a real benefit... On the other hand, Materialism lacks relations to the highest functions of the free human spirit... It can hardly close the circle of its system without borrowing from Idealism."⁷² Like Helmholtz, Lange recognises the essential contribution that materialism makes to the development of the exact sciences while also perceiving the danger that materialism poses when it encroaches on the legitimate realm of idealism: the drive for unity, expressed in moral and ethical philosophy.⁷³ Lange's engagement with materialism aims to bring to the forefront what he sees as the essential conflict within philosophy that has hitherto gone systematically unexamined: the conflict between materialism and idealism. Central to this project is his claim that, when pushed to its limit, materialism always tends to revert into its opposite—idealism.

Lange's work influenced a wide-range of thinkers: Marx commented on both Lange's philosophical and political writings in a number of letters; Nietzsche was a fan and called Lange's *History of Materialism*, "The most significant philosophical work to have appeared in the last hundred years";⁷⁴ and, Bertrand Russell wrote an introduction to the English translation of Lange's history of materialism. Lange's three-volume history focuses on the relationship between materialism and idealism from Democritean atomism through to the scientific materialism of his day, touching on the relationship between theoretical philosophy, religion and moral philosophy. Lange's analysis is coloured by a strongly physiological reading of Kant's transcendental deduction. Lange's neo-Kantianism, like Helmholtz', orients itself around epistemological problems, particularly the problem of how idealism and materialism could adequately account for sensation and objective knowledge.

⁷² Friedrich Albert Lange, *History of materialism and critique of its present importance: Volume 3*, trans. Ernest Chester Thomas. (London: Routledge, 2001). 340.

⁷³ See Klaus Christian Köhnke, *The rise of neo-Kantianism*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). 166. Köhnke claims, "The object of Lange's critique of materialism is thus solely to rescue the ethical picture of the world from the mechanistic-determinist." While this might be the primary goal, Lange's efforts have far wider implications.

⁷⁴ George J. Stack, *Lange and Nietzsche*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1983). 10.

Looking back to Helmholtz for a moment, the epistemological error committed by scientific materialism is precisely that the form of knowledge it claims is objective (knowledge gained from empirical experience) is prone to error and, therefore, ultimately subjective. In some ways, Lange, even more than Helmholtz, inaugurates the epistemological problem that comes to frame neo-Kantianism more generally. The problem of how the knowledge gained from experience can be made an object of knowledge in the Kantian sense, i.e. one satisfies both Kant's criteria of *objective universality* and *apodictic certainty*, reasserts itself continuously in the neo-Kantian tradition and can be seen as its central epistemological problematic.⁷⁵ I will now turn to Lange's examination of Kant in the second volume of his history of materialism in order to demonstrate this problematic.

One problem for both materialism and idealism is the problem of scepticism: personified on the idealist side by Bishop Berkeley and the materialist side by the *Encyclopedists* Jean le Rond D'Alembert and the Baron d'Holbach. For Lange, dogmatic materialism is unable refute dogmatic idealism: Holbach was unable—much to his chagrin—to convincingly refute Berkeley's idealism. In contrast to this, at least at first glance, Lange appears to endorse the certainty natural scientific accounts of sensation as a panacea against scepticism, specifically the “physiology of the sense-organs” which “are calculated to confirm the Pythagorean proposition that man is the measure of things, seems to offer promising solutions to the problems of sensation.”⁷⁶ However, Lange adopts a position close to Helmholtz against the apparent certainty of scientific materialism.

As Lange states, “*Consciousness* cannot be explained out of material movements. However conclusively it is shown that it is entirely dependent on material changes, the relation of *external movement* to *sensation* remains inconceivable.”⁷⁷ For Lange, sensation is the result of a psycho-physical synthesis in the subject. Lange, however, wishes to go further than Kant. In this light, he takes aim at what he calls Kant's formal idealism. For Lange, Kant's greatest weakness is that “he allowed to continue at all an understanding free from

⁷⁵ This becomes very clear in my examination of Heinrich Rickert in Chapter 3. For Rickert, the central problem is how the normally subjectively conceived realms of history and culture could be made an object of scientific knowledge.

⁷⁶ Friedrich Albert Lange, *History of materialism and critique of its present importance: Volume 2*, trans. Ernest Chester Thomas. (London: Routledge, 2001). 158.

⁷⁷ Lange, *History of materialism and critique of its present importance: Volume 2*: 157.

the influence of the senses.”⁷⁸ Here, Lange once again follows Helmholtz insofar as he attempts to bridge Kantian philosophy with the physiology of the senses. Kant could not achieve this, for Helmholtz, because he “investigated only cognitions finding their expression in language.”⁷⁹ Lange, on the one hand, re-asserts the Kantian problem of the *thing-in-itself* while, on the other hand, accepting the materialist account of sensation. This seems entirely inconsistent, but Lange is able to assert these two seemingly contradictory positions by shifting the Kantian problematic away from the question of the objective validity of subjective knowledge to the epistemological question of the correct acquisition of knowledge qua scientific cognition. In other words, by framing the *thing-in-itself* as a strictly epistemological problem, Lange is able to borrow from materialism while also criticizing it.

To this end, Lange employs an interesting method: he pushes materialism to its extreme in order to discover its idealism, something that I will show is mirrored in Lange’s protégé Hermann Cohen’s *critical idealism* in Chapter 3. On the one hand, scientific materialism, which built an epistemology onto its scientific insights into physiology of the sense-organs, represents the highest triumph of the empirical method. On the other hand, the physiology of the sense-organs represents the epistemological limit of scientific materialism.⁸⁰

For Lange, materialism tends to be self-undermining once its scientific insights are systematised philosophically:

What is the Body? What is Matter? What is the Physical? And modern physiology, just as much as philosophy, must answer that they are all only our ideas; necessary ideas, ideas resulting according to natural laws, but still *never the things in themselves*. The consistently Materialistic view thus changes round, therefore, into a consistently idealistic view.⁸¹

Following Helmholtz’ signal theory of perception, Lange says that the senses give us “effects of things”, but not accurate pictures or the things-in-themselves. After offering several examples, Lange concludes that “our apparently simplest sensations are not only occasioned by a natural phenomenon which in itself is something quite other than the sensation... their quality is by no means merely determined by the external stimulus and

⁷⁸ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁹ Helmholtz, *Epistemological Writings*: 143.

⁸⁰ Lange, *History of materialism and critique of its present importance: Volume 3*: 202.

⁸¹ Ibid., 223. [My emphasis] See also, *ibid.*, 214. Lange states: “matter... whether we conceive of it atomistically or as a continuum, is a factitious principle to aid us in bringing phenomena into an unbroken connexion of cause and effect.”

the fixed constitution of an organ, but by the constellation of collective acurrent sensations.”⁸² In other words, if we follow the materialist account of sensation we will discover not only that sensation is the product of internal organisation within the subject, but that the world of appearances is distinct from the world as it is in-itself. Even the sense-organs themselves are a representation of a physical mechanism and, therefore, merely a necessary picture of the unknown state of things.⁸³ In this light, the materialist account of sensation might be able to tell us something about the empirical world, which Lange claims with Helmholtz is inferential, but nothing about *things-in-themselves*. The materialist method is acceptable as long as the subject of investigation is the empirical world, but becomes problematic once the subject is reason.

Lange believes that by pushing the materialist account to its limit he reveals that their account of sensation points towards a *transcendental order of things*. In other words, because of their fallibility the sensation reveals an “unknown state of things” pointing towards the impossibility of the scientific materialist solution to the epistemological problem of the *thing-in-itself*.⁸⁴ The materialist solution necessitates an account of organisation and it is at this point that the materialist must become an idealist:

If it is first shown that the quality of our sense perceptions is wholly determined by the constitution of our organs, then we can no longer dismiss with the predicate 'irrefutable but absurd' the postulate that the entire coherent unity itself to which we reduce our sense perceptions, in a word our entire experience, is determined by a spiritual organisation which compels us to experience what we experience, to think as we think, whereas the same objects may appear quite different to a different organisation and the 'thing-in-itself' cannot be conceived or imagined by any finite being.⁸⁵

In other words, materialism ultimately points beyond itself to idealism. In order to close its philosophical system materialism is forced to encroach on the realm of idealism—reason—which Lange equates with the systematic unity of knowledge. Materialism must be restricted to its domain or it risks undermining itself: “Our sense-organs are organs of abstraction... If it is said that abstraction even in thinking leads to the knowledge of truth, we must observe that this is only relatively true, namely, in so far as we speak of that

⁸² Ibid., 203-4.

⁸³ Lange, *History of materialism and critique of its present importance*. Volume 2: 229.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 229-30. Lange does not believe that the scientific account of the mechanism of sensation is inadmissible for philosophy. Rather, he says that, “we see that such a mechanism like every other represented mechanism, must be itself only a necessarily occurring picture of an unknown state of things.”

⁸⁵ Köhnke, *The rise of neo-Kantianism*: 164. It is important to note that neither Helmholtz nor Lange dispute the scientific importance of the metaphysical materialist account of sensation, only its wider applicability to epistemology, ethics, and moral philosophy. Therefore, it can be said that Helmholtz explicitly and Lange implicitly accept a physiological account of sensation.

knowledge which necessarily results from our organisation, and therefore never contradicts itself.”⁸⁶ For Lange, materialism points to what the idealist already knows: that knowledge, even sense knowledge, is a product of human organisation. For materialism to close its philosophical system—that is, in order to have both a theoretical and an ethical and moral philosophy—it must go beyond its limit and, in doing so, encroach on the ground of idealism.⁸⁷ This occurs because natural science is initially concerned with the particular, but, as I have shown, scientific materialism had a loftier goal—to construct a philosophical system.

The drive to systematicity demonstrates the natural desire for unity that Lange ascribes to idealism. The concern with the particular, "delights us; [its] method compels our admiration, and by the continual succession of discoveries our glance is perhaps conducted to an infinite perspective of ever more perfect insight. Yet with this we are already quitting the ground of natural science."⁸⁸ Here, materialism becomes engaged in Helmholtz' causal nexus of induction and its aim shifts from the *particular* to the *whole*, the domain of reason. In embracing the whole as unity, "we bring our own nature into the object... All comprehension follows aesthetic principles and every step towards the whole is a step towards the Ideal."⁸⁹ For Lange, it is a fact of human nature that we construct an ideal world to sit alongside empirical reality—the world of appearances. Following this, materialism, the lowest and firmest stage in philosophy, should be restricted to empirical reality while idealism should deal with the loftier aspects of human reason. That said, Lange recognises that idealism cannot replace natural science: ideas do not grant knowledge of the external world, nor are they mental delusions. Rather, they are products of human organisation that are “grounded in the natural disposition of mankind and possess a practical purpose.”⁹⁰ Thus, Lange separates scientific inquiry—the empirical world of the understanding—from the drive to the unity of systematic thought—the realm of reason.

Lange views ideas as an expression of the drive towards unity, but once philosophy fools itself into believing that ideas have objective existence “we plunge into a boundless

⁸⁶ Ibid., 3: 218.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 223.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 341. Here, Lange also implicitly agrees with Helmholtz' description of thought as naturally corresponding with the inductive scientific method.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Quoted from *ibid.*, 165.

sea of metaphysical errors.”⁹¹ In Lange’s formulation, materialism will continue to play a useful function as an antidote to the possibly deceptive fancies of speculative idealism.⁹² Materialism will always remain at the ground of philosophical speculation, but it cannot form a systematic theory of knowledge on its own. Materialism, therefore, must be restricted to its domain: the empirical world of appearances. As Lange states, “The Idealist can, and must in fact, in natural science everywhere apply the same conceptions and methods as the Materialist; but what to the latter is definitive truth is to the Idealist only a necessary result of our organisation.”⁹³ The chief error of materialism is that it attempts to move from sense knowledge—knowledge of the particular and of mere appearances—to a systematic totality of knowledge. For Lange while materialism can give an account of empirical reality, it fails to give a convincing account of areas of knowledge that are governed primarily by ideas and concepts—moral and ethical philosophy.

The positive result of Lange’s critique of materialism is a re-orientation around an epistemological problem: how can knowledge of these different areas of thought—human and scientific—be acquired correctly? It is clear that materialism alone cannot grant knowledge of truth since it can only deal with the representation of physical mechanisms, not with what those mechanisms are in-themselves. However, as Lange stated above, those representations are *necessary*. Therefore, insofar as the exact sciences are dealing with the phenomenal world the method of materialism is valid. However, once it deceives itself into thinking that its representations are truth, it has gone beyond its proper ground.

The problems that Lange associates with materialism arise once it goes beyond its borders and attempts to gain a foothold in moral and ethical philosophy. For Lange, that field of philosophy cannot be decided on materialist grounds because the realm of ethics is a product of human organization not nature. Helmholtz, for his part, was satisfied with a methodological solution to this issue: acknowledgement that the human and exact sciences deal with different areas of knowledge and, therefore, require different methods. Lange, however, deepens this epistemological problem dramatically: the *human sciences* and the *exact sciences* are not only methodologically different, but deal with *ontologically distinct* worlds. Idealism must not commit the same error as materialism: it must renounce its claim to

⁹¹ Lange, *History of materialism and critique of its present importance*. Volume 2: 157.

⁹² Ibid., 343. As Lange states: “Materialism... will always reappear, and will destroy the bolder speculations with an attempt to satisfy the instinct of reason towards unity by a minimum of exaltation above the real and demonstrable.”

⁹³ Lange, *History of materialism and critique of its present importance*. Volume 2: 324.

certainty of reality. For Lange, it is only by confining materialism and idealism to their respective corners that their insoluble conflict can be resolved. As Lange states:

The more it [metaphysics] continues theoretical, and tries to compete in certainty with the sciences of reality, all the less will it succeed in obtaining general importance. The more on the other hand, it brings the *world of existence* into connexion with the *world of values* and tries to raise itself by the apprehension of phenomena to an ethical influence, the more will it make form predominate over matter, and, without doing violence to the facts, will erect in the architecture of ideas a temple of worship to the eternal and divine.⁹⁴

Lange notes that this path, which he calls *free poetry* is fraught with danger: it might renounce any claim on reality. Lange sees two possible paths: first, the suppression and abolition of religion and the transfer of religious functions to the state, science and art; and, second, the attempt to “penetrate to the core of religion, and to overcome all fanaticism and superstition by conscious elevation of the falsification of reality by mythus, which of course, can render no service to knowledge.”⁹⁵

Lange takes the second path because, he claims, it avoids the danger of leading to general spiritual impoverishment. The second path is what he calls the *standpoint of the ideal* which is essentially creative and aesthetic in character. At its core is a critique of the relationship between religion and idealist philosophy. The danger of the ideal is that materialism can destroy it as long as it is inexorably entwined with religious thought. In other words, materialist criticism can lead to the complete negation of the ideal. Only by removing the core of religion in the process of elevating the soul above reality can idealism ensure its safety from materialist criticism.⁹⁶ In order to safeguard the Idea, Lange claims that we must separate it “from any correspondence with historical and scientific knowledge, but also without falsification of them, let us accustom ourselves to regard the world of ideas as *figurative representation* of the entire truth, as just as indispensable to human progress as the knowledge of the understanding.”⁹⁷ With this, Lange removes any theoretical content from religion and reduces it to an ethical worldview. At the same time, the ideal is freed from religious, historical and scientific dogma and becomes truly free and spontaneous.

For Lange, the idea expresses itself in reality through its distance and spontaneity, which are the opposite qualities of the materialist’s inert law-governed world of

⁹⁴ Ibid. [My emphasis]

⁹⁵ Ibid., 344.

⁹⁶ See *ibid.*, 344-5.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 346. [My emphasis]

appearance. This is the crux of Lange's idealist and socialist critique of materialism: "The victory over disintegrating egoism and the deadly chillness of the heart will only be won by a great ideal, which appears amidst the wondering peoples as a 'stranger from another world,' and by demanding the impossible unhinges the reality."⁹⁸ Idealism does not renounce its claim on reality, but must remain separate from it. The point of contact of reality and the idea is the point at which the creative ideal manifests itself concretely as social change. How precisely this occurs is not clear, but Lange's statement reads as oddly messianic. Materialism, for its part, builds its theory of society on top of already existing reality and cannot, from this, generate spontaneous change in social circumstances. This is the revolutionary content of Lange's thought.

There are difficulties with Lange's conception of the relationship between the ideal and reality. First, is his assumption that the ideal can exist in an ontologically distinct sphere from history and science. This argument contains the implicit claim that the ideal, which Lange conceives as essentially aesthetic, deals with a form of knowledge that is inaccessible to the other standpoints he mentions, namely science and history. Lange, therefore, strictly separates spheres of knowledge with possibility of totality only occurring in the ideal. This totality, however, is only figurative or symbolic because the ideal, if it were the sole source of knowledge, would lead to the dogmatic belief in myth. Idealism, therefore, has no real influence on experience, which is reduced to experience qua scientific cognition. Experience of the empirical world—what we could call everyday or *embodied experience*—is completely shut off from the influence of idealism and relegated to a form of theoretical philosophy that has become essentially synonymous with materialism and science. By removing the theoretical content of idealism and siding with materialism as the sole arbiter of empirical reality, Lange has removed the final traces of metaphysical influence on the subject's experience of the physical world.

What role does the truth of reason play for epistemology? Truth appears permanently blocked, or, at best, displaced in ontologically distinct domains of knowledge: the ideal, science, and history. Like Helmholtz, Lange views the epistemological problem as an essentially scientific one and resolves the problem by deferring to the empirical sciences. By renouncing its epistemological claim on reality, idealism retains only its normative content. This content, however, is in a strange way more real than the empirical or, at least,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 355.

more human. Helmholtz' approach was the examination of the causal nexus underlying empirical reality in order to bend nature to the will of human beings. Lange's approach is not so different: the ideal—Lange's ideal untainted by the static dogma of religion or science—must be imposed on the inert empirical world from the outside. The subject, then, is conceived in opposition to nature and the supersensible ideal in opposition to empirical reality. The idea must be nurtured in thought in order to pave the way to the inevitable progressive overcoming of existing reality.⁹⁹ The contingent empirical world of appearance, along with its structures and institutions, stand in the way of the progress of thought that is, at the same time, the inevitable progress of humanity. Lange must necessarily separate the ideal from the empirical in order for the ideal to not get bogged down in the reality it must negate.

Since Lange abandons inquiry into empirical world to materialism, experience of empirical reality becomes fully governed by the sense-certainty of materialism, something that is not fundamentally problematic for Lange since reality itself is mere appearance. Further, Lange cannot provide a convincing account of how the supersensible ideal can manifest itself in reality other than a vague messianic account, as I noted above. The ontological divide that Lange posits between the various spheres of knowledge mirrors an epistemological one: without any form of mediation between the supersensible and reality it is difficult to see how Lange's idea could make any claim on reality. Lange is forced back into a dogmatic position: the dogmatic belief in the unlimited progress of thought, without an adequate account of how that thought relates to or can be manifested in empirical reality. What Lange leaves for philosophy is idealism without an epistemology and materialism stripped of any normative content. In abandoning epistemology, idealism loses its connection to reality becoming purely formal. Lange is satisfied with this solution and solves the epistemological problem this presents by using the developments of science and materialism to fill the gaps. Lange posits a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between *reason*—the domain of the idea—and *empirical reality*. The manifestation of the ideal in reality becomes idealist philosophy's *infinite task*.

⁹⁹ Lange, *History of materialism and critique of its present importance. Volume 3*: 361. See also, *ibid.*, 354-5. This movement entails the overcoming of existing institutions, most notably religion. Lange's fervent opposition to any form of dogmatic thinking manifests itself socially through his critique of religion, just as it manifested itself philosophically through his critique of both dogmatic idealism and materialism. Both Lange and Helmholtz, however, embody the nineteenth century belief in the unlimited power of thought to overcome existing reality, a position that contains its own share of dogmatic assumptions.

At this point, I will now move on from Lange and neo-Kantianism to an examination of Karl Marx's critical materialism, which, I claim, will offer an alternative to both Lange's abstract idealism and the empiricism of metaphysical materialism. Lange comes under explicit criticism from Marx for his separation of the idea and reality. In the third chapter of this thesis, I examine Hermann Cohen's critique of Lange's psychological reading of Kant. Cohen provides a convincing critique of Lange's Kantianism, while, at the same time, adopting many of his presuppositions, in particular the view shared by Helmholtz and Lange that empirical experience is essentially erroneous and must be, in some way, overcome through the subordination of experience and reality to the ideal which is, in Cohen's case, the progress of the mathematical sciences. Helmholtz' signal theory of perception comes to form the foundation of the neo-Kantian theory of concept-formation which views concepts as fundamentally distinct from empirical reality and concrete experience. This theory of concept-formation is not only found in Cohen's scientific idealism, but also within Heinrich Rickert's more historical and empirically oriented form of neo-Kantianism.

2. Marxian Materialism

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that Lange's neo-Kantianism ended in the antithesis of a physical world governed by mechanical natural laws and a free realm of ideal human meaning. In this chapter I examine one possible alternative to the antithesis of scientific materialism and idealism through an examination of the development Marx's form of materialism. The contrast between Marx and neo-Kantianism or scientific materialism is especially interesting in light of that fact that both Marx and Engels were familiar with Lange and his work. As Marx writes in a letter to Ludwig Kugelmann:

Mr Lange, you see, has made a great discovery. All history may be subsumed in one single great natural law. This natural law is the *phrase* (— the Darwinian expression becomes, in this application, just a phrase —) '**struggle for life**', and the content of this phrase is the Malthusian law of population, or **rather** over-population. Thus, instead of analysing this '**struggle for life**' as it manifests itself historically in various specific forms of society, all that need be done is to transpose every given struggle into the phrase '**struggle for life**', and then this phrase into the Malthusian 'population fantasy'.¹

In Marx's view, Lange subsumes history under a natural law, specifically the struggle for life, and treats history abstractly in the method of the natural sciences.² Lange's application of the *phrase* 'struggle for life' lacks any actual real social or historical content. It is the abstract and external application of a category derived from the natural sciences onto human society. History is retroactively presented conceptually as the inevitable unfolding of this natural law.³

In the few places that Marx mentions Lange, he always emphasises problems of method. As Marx writes in a letter to Engels on June 27, 1870: "What this Lange has to say about the Hegelian method and my application of the same is simply childish. First, he understands *rien* about Hegel's method and, therefore, second, still less about my critical manner of applying it."⁴ In light of this, it is probably not surprising that Marx's materialism is not represented in Lange's history. In fact, the only mention of Marx occurs in a footnote where Lange praises him as a political economist.

¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx Engels Collected Works* vol. 47 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), 529. Marx criticises Malthus a number of times, most notably in an extensive footnote in the first volume of *Capital*.

² Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes. (London: New Left Books, 1973), 46.

³ In this, Lange's philosophy resembles the standpoint of political economy, something Marx criticises exhaustively in *Capital*.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Marx and Engels Correspondence*. (London: International Publishers, 1968), p. 268.

Engels also found it necessary to confront Lange on the subject of Hegel directly in a letter dated March 29, 1865: “That the detail of [Hegel’s] philosophy of nature is full of nonsense I will of course gladly grant you, but his *real* philosophy of nature is to be found in the second part of the *Logic*, in the theory of Essence, the true core of the whole doctrine.”⁵ Engels could not have put it better; if the difference between Marxian critical materialism and neo-Kantianism could be distilled to a single point it would their competing understandings of the relationship between essence and appearance. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Lange conceives of nature, the world of appearances, as radically separate from the ideal that corresponds to what Lange conceives of as the truth or essence of reality.

Marx deals with the question of essence and appearance implicitly in his doctoral dissertation on the difference between the Democritean and Epicurean philosophies. For Lange, Democritus’ “rigidly consistent and calmly reasoned” atomism represents the first complete system of materialism and provides the foundations of contemporary scientific inquiry into the natural world.⁶ However, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Democritus’ system contains an inherent scepticism in regards to the truth of appearances. As Marx states, atoms—the principle—do not appear. The atom is a concept.⁷

There appears to be two conflicting objectivities at work. On the one hand, reality confronts sense perception as ephemeral and changing while, on the other hand, the underlying principle of reality—the atom—is inert and eternal. In light of this, Marx claims that Democritus resolves the antinomy between reality and the principle by conceiving of reality as subjective semblance:

For Democritus, who considers composition as the only form of the nature of appearance, appearance does not by itself show that it is appearance, something different from essence. Thus when appearance is considered in terms of its existence essence becomes totally blended [*konfundiert*] with it; when considered in terms of its concept, essence is totally separated from its existence, so that it descends to the level of subjective semblance.⁸

⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works: Volume 42*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), p. 135.

⁶ Lange, *History of Materialism and Critique of its Present Importance*, p.4f1.

⁷ Marx and Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works: Volume 1*: 39. “Sensuous appearance... does not belong to the atoms themselves. It is not objective appearance, but subjective semblance [*Schein*] [...] The principles can therefore be perceived only through reason, since they are inaccessible to the sensuous eye if only because of their smallness. For this reason they are even called *ideas*.”

⁸ Marx and Engels, *Marx and Engels Complete Works: Volume 1*: 64.

The antinomy between the eternal and unchanging principle and unstable changing nature of reality is removed from reality and transferred into self-consciousness as a distinction between essence and appearance; a distinction that is absent at the level of sense-perception.⁹ As Jairus Banaji puts it, “what is true, the principle, remains devoid of any form of appearance... on the other hand, the world of appearances, divorced from any principle, is left as an independent reality.”¹⁰ The principle takes on a life of its own, lacking any concrete relation to the reality it purports to underpin. It is not a coincidence that Lange, who begins with Democritus, resolves the contradiction between materialism and idealism in a similar fashion when he separates the world of mere appearances, which is left to materialism, from the subjective truth of reason. It seems that, for Lange, the problem is that essence does not appear in either history or nature, but only subjectively in reason. The subordination of history to the abstract ‘struggle for life’, therefore, has validity because it is the reasonable application of a principle of reason. Marx’s conception of the relationship between nature and history fundamentally undermines this method.

Marx is equally unsatisfied with the empiricism typical of the metaphysical materialism prevalent in Germany in the 1840s and 50s that we examined in the previous chapter. That form of materialism took as its starting point Feuerbach’s materialist critique of Hegel. Like Feuerbach, metaphysical materialism asserted the truth of sense perception against the abstractions of speculative philosophy. Unlike Feuerbach, however, they begin from a number of explicitly posited metaphysical presuppositions. It will become clear through my examination that Feuerbach’s materialism is significantly more radical than the metaphysical materialists that drew inspiration from his method.¹¹ Marx’s debt to Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel and, later, Marx’s critique of Feuerbach in the *German Ideology*

⁹ Marx and Engels, *Marx and Engels Complete Works: Volume 1*: 39. “Democritus makes sensuous appearance into subjective semblance; but the antinomy, banned from the world of objects, now exists in his own self-consciousness, where the concept of the atom and sensuous perception face each other as enemies.”

¹⁰ Jairus Banaji, “From the Commodity to Capital: Hegel’s Dialectic in Marx’s Capital” in Diane Elson, *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capital*. (London: CSE Books, 1979), 21. Jairus Banaji stresses Marx’s critique of Democritus bringing him closer to Epicurus. Marx states that “Epicurus was the first to grasp appearance as appearance”. I return to this point in the conclusion of this chapter, but, in short, it is not clear that Marx simply rejects Democritus for Epicurus. In fact, what is interesting is that Marx posits an essential connection between the two. What must be brought to light, therefore, is Epicurus’ solution to the contradiction that Marx locates in Democritus’ conception of the atom.

¹¹ See Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, trans. Clemens Dutt. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974). <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/don/ch07a.htm>>

According to Engels, Feuerbach apparently repudiated this group. As Engels writes, “The vulgarising peddlers who dealt in materialism in the Germany of the fifties in no wise [sic] went beyond these limits of their teachers... Feuerbach was absolutely right in repudiating responsibility for this materialism; only he had no right to confuse the doctrine of the itinerant preachers with materialism in general.”

and the preceding “Theses on Feuerbach” help provide a basis for a proper understanding of Marx’s relationship to the philosophies of materialism and idealism. The relationship between Marx and Feuerbach, therefore, forms the first part of this chapter. The second part of this chapter examines the relationship between nature and history that Marx develops in the *German Ideology*. Finally, I examine the epistemological dimension of Marx’s critical materialism, seen most clearly in his conception of the fetish-character of the commodity. In short, I claim that the enigma of commodity fetishism represents the epistemological limit of both materialism and idealism traditionally conceived.

2.1 Feuerbach’s ‘Materialist’ Critique of Hegel

Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel, articulated clearly in his 1839 text “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy”, revolves around a central deficiency he finds in the Hegelian system—its formalism. Feuerbach’s central claim is that the dialectical contradictions in Hegel’s work, such as the one between Being and Nothing found in the *Logic*, are nothing but formal logical contradictions. For Feuerbach, these contradictions rest on an unmediated presupposition within Hegel’s apparently presuppositionless system—the presupposition abstract philosophical thought. For Feuerbach, Hegel, like Kant, Fichte and Schelling, was critical of certain qualities of existing philosophy, but not of its essence. As Marx Wartofsky claims, Hegel essentially follows the tradition of German speculative philosophy that sees “an absolute dichotomy between intellectual intuition and ‘actual’ or ‘empirical’ intuition’.”¹² Further, these systems all presuppose the Absolute and, as such, “[t]hat the Absolute existed was beyond all doubt. All it needed was to prove itself and be known as such.”¹³ Thus, for Feuerbach, Hegel’s philosophy is dogmatic insofar as it presupposes the existence of the Absolute. The result of this assumption is that the moments of non-identity or contradiction within the Hegelian system occurs within an overarching Absolute Identity between thought and being.¹⁴

¹² Marx W. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 189.

¹³ Ludwig Feuerbach, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy” in Zvar Hanfi, *The Fiery Brook* (London: Anchor Press, 1972).

<<http://marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/critique/index.htm>>

¹⁴ Feuerbach, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy”.

<<http://marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/critique/index.htm>>

As Feuerbach states, “What Hegel premises as stages and constituent parts of mediation, he thinks are determined by the Absolute Idea. Hegel does not step outside the Idea, nor does he forget it.”

Feuerbach's chief criticism of Hegel's idealism, along with the whole tradition of German speculative philosophy, is that it is a philosophy of identity. Feuerbach describes Hegel's dialectic as a monologue of thought with itself. The monologic approach is problematic: truth cannot be found within the unity of thought. As Feuerbach states, "[t]he most important thing to realise is that absolute thought, that is, thought which is isolated and cut off from sensuousness, *cannot get beyond formal identity* – the *identity of thought with itself*."¹⁵ So long as thought remains within itself the Hegelian system will necessarily be one-sided and subjective. In contrast to the Hegelian monologue, Feuerbach's philosophy is conceived as a dialogue between speculative thought and empirical reality:

The truth lies only in the unification of 'I' and 'You.' The Other of pure thought, however, is the sensuous intellect in general. In the field of philosophy, proof therefore consists only in the fact that the contradiction between sensuous intellect and pure thought is disposed, so that thought is true not only for itself but also for its opposite.¹⁶

Truth cannot be grasped within the Hegelian system, Feuerbach claims, because thought never goes outside of itself; speculative thought never engages with its other—empirical reality.

According to Feuerbach, truth occurs immediately in the non-identical correspondence between subjective thought and objective reality. For example, Feuerbach claims that the other of Being is not Nothing, but real sensuous being: "Sensuous being denies logical being; the former contradicts the latter and vice versa." Idealism is unable to prove the reality of logical being so long as it remains purely speculative. In light of this, Feuerbach charges Hegel with committing an "unmediated break with the sensuous". As Feuerbach writes, "I enter the Logic as well as intellectual perception only through a violent act, through a transcendent act, or through an immediate break with real perception."¹⁷ The result of such an unmediated break is that categories, such as Being, take on a purely abstract and formal character and, in turn, are isolated from their real empirical origin. An illustration of Feuerbach's thesis can be found in his examination of the opening of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The first chapter of the *Phenomenology* is, for Feuerbach, "nothing but a verbal game in which thought that is already quite certain of

¹⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, "Principles of the Philosophy of the Future" in Zwar Hanfi, *The Fiery Brook* (London: Anchor Press, 1972). Feuerbach develops his criticisms of the monologic approach more explicitly in Part 3 of his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*.

<<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/future/future2.htm>>

¹⁶ Feuerbach, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy".

<<http://marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/critique/index.htm>>

¹⁷ Ibid.

itself as truth plays with natural consciousness.”¹⁸ For him, abstract universal ‘Here’ and ‘Now’ are derived from concrete ‘heres’ and ‘nows’.

Hegel’s refutation of sense-certainty “does not refute the ‘here’ that forms the object of sensuous consciousness... He refutes only the logical and formal ‘here,’ the logical ‘now’.”¹⁹ The point at which Hegel appears to engage seriously with sensuous perception he presupposes its insignificance. Despite his refutation of sense-certainty, Feuerbach claims that Hegel never engages with sensuous consciousness as such. Hegel’s refutation occurs from the standpoint of the Absolute, which presupposes the identity of thought and being. Thus, Feuerbach claims that even when Hegel posits a contradiction, such as the one found in the opening of the *Logic* between Being and Nothing, he is positing a contradiction within thought.

Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel rests on two central points. First, Hegel’s abstract formal categories never come into relation to the concrete sensuous thing from which they are derived. Second, Hegel’s system presupposes the identity of thought and being. In light of this, Hegel may claim to reconcile subject and object, but for Feuerbach this form of reconciliation remains formal and subjective. Accordingly, Sensuous consciousness and the objectivity of physical reality remain essentially untouched and outside of the Hegelian system. As Feuerbach states:

Thought *confined to itself* is... unable to arrive at anything positively distinct from and opposed to itself; for that very reason it also has no other criterion of truth except that something does not contradict the Idea or thought – only a formal, subjective criterion that is not in a position to decide whether the truth of thought is also the truth of reality.”²⁰

Against what he considers Hegel’s isolated monologue, Feuerbach wants to reassert the truth of sensuous consciousness and, in turn, the objectivity of empirical reality. I will now examine how Feuerbach’s method differs from Hegel’s in order to underline this alternative.

Feuerbach credits Hegel with rescuing philosophy from thinkers such as Schelling and Jacob Böhme who reject any rational limit to thought. These thinkers dissolve philosophy into the realm of the imagination. While Schelling correctly emphasises the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Feuerbach, “Principles of the Philosophy of the Future”.

<<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/future/future2.htm>>

importance of nature, he remains trapped in the monological identity of thought with itself that dissolves the true objective otherness of nature into the subjective imagination. The identity of being and nature is pre-established since nature is not the objective other of thought but, rather, the product of the subjective imagination. For Feuerbach, Schelling undermines the possibility of critical philosophy, which he thinks must be grounded in the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity or, in other words, the non-identical.

The chief error of speculative philosophy is that it proceeds from an already established identity of thought and being. Hegel proceeds differently; he aims to prove the Absolute and, therefore, arrives at it as the result of a process. As Feuerbach states, “There is... a negative and critical element in Hegel even if what really determines his thinking is the Absolute.”²¹ Despite the fact that he aims to prove the Absolute, Hegel does not break decisively from the speculative tradition. Feuerbach concludes that there are moments of negativity in Hegel’s philosophy, but the game is rigged; there is no question that those moments of negativity will be resolved in the overarching identity of the Absolute. That the contradiction between thought and being will be resolved on the side of thought is the chief presupposition of all German idealism and lies at the root of all philosophical dogmatism. It is on this point that we can locate the root of Feuerbach’s critique: Hegel may develop a truly critical philosophy, but it still contains its own share of presuppositions.

In contrast to Hegel, Feuerbach describes his own philosophy as *genetico-critical*. Hegel’s philosophy contains the negative—the critical—but does not account for the genetic. Against Hegel, Feuerbach places the question of *origin* at the forefront of his philosophy: “A genetico-critical philosophy is one that does not dogmatically demonstrate or apprehend an object given through perception... but examines its origin.”²² This can be seen, at least in part, in the different conceptions of the relationship between universal and particular held by Hegel and Feuerbach. As Wartofsky states, “Feuerbach adopts the Baconian inductivist sense of universals as generalizations from particular instances... universals are abstract, and existent particulars alone are taken as real.”²³ In contrast to

²¹ Feuerbach, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy”.

<<http://marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/critique/index.htm>>

²² Ibid.

²³ Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*: 190.

Hegel, Feuerbach does not begin from the given whole—the Absolute—but, rather, from the particularity of concrete sensuous particularity.

Feuerbach agrees with Hegel that Being should be thought of as the fundamental category, but he aims to recast it in a different light. For Feuerbach, Being is not an abstract logical category. Rather, it is the category that provides the ground for the reconciliation of man and nature. Hegel, therefore, gets it right in the *Logic* when he begins with Being, but gets it wrong insofar as begins from Being in the abstract. In abstracting his category of Being from concrete sensuous being, Hegel's *Phenomenology* and his *Logic* can only conceive of man in the abstract. For Feuerbach, just as the abstract universal 'Here' and 'Now' are derived from concrete 'heres' and 'nows', the universal category of Being is an abstraction from concrete sensuous being.

For Feuerbach, man is conceived of, first and foremost, as a physical being. Any abstraction from empirical being comes into contradiction with man's particularity in his capacity as a physical being. Unlike Hegel who conceives of the empirical being as limited, Feuerbach underlines the fact that abstractions—consciousness, spirit, etc.—have originate in empirical being, i.e. in reality rather than thought. Thus, for Feuerbach, being always precedes thought. Natural man in his sense-certainty is an objective being; he has an objective relationship to the world through the real physical objects external to him.

According to Feuerbach's conception of being, humans have a double-character as both thinking and physical beings. It is here that we can locate the revolutionary newness of Feuerbach's *materialism*. Unlike previous forms of materialism that conceive of nature as distinct from man as an inert world of matter, according to Feuerbach's conception man is a part of nature. At the same time, however, prioritizing the naturalness of human beings limits of his thought. Rather than maintaining the non-identity of physical being and abstract being, Feuerbach reduces man to his physical nature. As Feuerbach writes, "[n]ature has built not only the mean workshop of the stomach, but also the temple of the brain."²⁴ Being becomes the ground for the reconciliation of human beings and nature, but one that lacks any form of mediation.

According to Feuerbach, because Being is, first and foremost, a physical category, man is able to reconcile himself to reality *immediately*. Feuerbach overcomes Hegel's

²⁴ Feuerbach, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy".
<<http://marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/critique/index.htm>>

‘rational mysticism’ through a return to nature: “Philosophy is the science of reality in its truth and totality. However, the all-encompassing reality is nature... The only source of salvation lies in a return to nature.”²⁵ However, he does not interrogate his conception of nature and, therefore, opens himself up to the charge of merely replacing Hegel’s one-sided subjectivity with a one-sided form of objectivity. In asserting the positive unity of human beings and nature, Feuerbach inverts the idealist identity of thought and being. Even if it was possible to accept that being precedes thought, physical being cannot be totally abstracted from thinking being, just as thought cannot be totally abstracted from reality.

It would appear that in the end Feuerbach’s philosophy is neither critical nor genetic. Like all of the materialists I have examined so far, Feuerbach asserts the primacy of objective reality over and against thought. In light of this, Feuerbach inverts the Hegelian antithesis of thought and being by asserting the primacy of physical being over thinking. He retains the philosophical antithesis between materialism and idealism typical not only of materialism, but of idealists such as Lange as well. The subject, which is first a foremost a natural being, exists within a natural world that is objective and eternal. For Feuerbach, the subject is both a real empirical subject (natural and objective) and a thinking subject (subjective and capable of abstract thought). The empirical subject, rather than the abstract subject of the idealist philosopher, becomes the ground on which Feuerbach overcomes the apparent contradiction between abstract thought and concrete reality. Further, for him the tension between thought and reality can be reconciled immanently in the subject. Philosophy needs no abstract presuppositions when it begins from human beings immersed in their natural reality.

Feuerbach resolves the contradiction between thought and being by asserting the positivity of sensuous immediacy.²⁶ Conceived in this way, nature confronts the subject as a fixed and eternal object: as *pure nature*. Certainly, this will represent a problem, but it also represents an alternative conception of man than any previous materialism. As Alfred Schmidt claims, “Feuerbach, whatever criticisms may be made of him, transcended existing materialism, with its largely mechanical or physiological standpoint, by grasping man and

²⁵ Feuerbach, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy”.

<<http://marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/critique/index.htm>>

²⁶ Christopher J. Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour: Marx and his Relation to Hegel*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 167. As Chris Arthur writes, “for Feuerbach, whatever the qualifications he introduces, the main drift of his positive doctrine is the assertion of an immediate unity between man and nature.”

nature qualitatively and objectively.”²⁷ As I have suggested, Feuerbach unfortunately falls back onto a traditional materialist, i.e. a form of material empiricism when he posits the immediate unity of human beings and nature in sense-certainty. Marx offers a clear critique of Feuerbach’s form of materialism in the *German Ideology*. Before moving to this critique of Feuerbach, I will show how this conception of man as an objective being is developed by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* [EPM].

2.2 Marx and Feuerbach

In general, Feuerbach’s materialist philosophy can be described an attempt to supersede philosophy qua speculative thought. However, as I have shown, Feuerbach’s materialism, unlike that of the metaphysical materialists, does not develop in abstract antithesis to speculative philosophy, but develops out of its contradictions. From this, we can say that Feuerbach’s critique of Hegelian philosophy and German idealism more generally does not take the form of an abstract negation. Rather, his materialism should be viewed as an attempt to *determinately negate* pure speculative philosophy. Feuerbach locates the moment of overcoming in the contradiction between thought and being or, in other words, philosophy and reality. As Marx writes in the *EPM*: “Feuerbach sees negation of the negation, the concrete concept, as thought which surpasses itself in thought and as thought which strives to be direct awareness, nature, reality.”²⁸ As we have seen, in contrast to Hegel, Feuerbach begins from the non-identity of subjective thought and objective being. He begins from a conception of man as immediately objective and natural. However, Feuerbach’s conception of sensuous certainty is not without its problems. In order to demonstrate Marx’s differences from Feuerbach I begin by examining Marx’s critique of Hegel in the *EPM*. This critique, as Marx himself claims, is heavily indebted to Feuerbach.

Marx’s debt to Feuerbach can be seen clearly in his early conceptions of *alienation* and *human essence*. Put simply, according to Marx, the material world of things, which takes on a life of its own, comes to dominate the proletariat. As I.I. Rubin lucidly puts it, for the young Marx “this ‘material’ element, which in fact dominates in economic life, is opposed

²⁷ Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*: 65.

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton. (London: Penguin, 1992), 382.

by the ‘human’ element as an ideal, as a norm, as that which should be.”²⁹ For Marx, the human essence is preserved in the alienated world as a mirror image of reality in a similar manner to Feuerbach’s conception of religion.

It will become clear that while Feuerbach may be the starting-point, even at this early stage Marx begins to move away from him by recognizing the positive significance of Hegel’s examination of estrangement and objectivity. Marx moves beyond Feuerbach by demonstrating how conceptual abstractions emerge as the result of human activity. Marx does not mimic Feuerbach’s attack on abstractions and the very notion of abstract thought. For Marx, the conceptual representation of these abstractions is not simply the result of questionable theoretical presuppositions, but of particular forms of social practice. In other words, Marx conceives of concepts and ideas as the products of social relations. Concepts and abstractions have a material basis; they are not simply mistakes or the product of misrecognition on the part of consciousness. Marx, therefore, presents an interesting conception of objectivity and concept-formation that, I will show, finds its most sophisticated form in *Capital*.

In the *EPM*, Marx begins to point towards this empirical starting-point. The orientation of this starting-point will be further developed in the “Theses on Feuerbach” and the *German Ideology*. I discuss this development further in the following section. For now, I will restrict myself to examining Marx’s discussion of Feuerbach and Hegel in the *EPM*. In the *EPM*, Marx agrees with Feuerbach’s assessment of Hegel’s philosophy:

*Logic is the currency of the mind, the speculative thought-value of man and of nature, their essence which has become indifferent to all real determinateness and hence unreal, alienated thought, and therefore thought which abstracts from nature and real man; abstract thought.*³⁰

Hegel, Marx claims, posits the identity of human nature and self-consciousness. The result is that “[a]ll estrangement of human nature is therefore *nothing* but *estrangement* of self-consciousness.”³¹ For Hegel, the object that confronts spirit appears objective and estranged, but the truth of that appearance is that the estranged object is objectified self-consciousness.³² Thus, Hegel identifies objectivity with estrangement. As Marx states, “*Objectivity* as such is seen as an *estranged* human relationship which does not correspond to

²⁹ I.I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, trans. Miloš Samardžija and Fredy Perlman. (Detroit: Black and Red, 1972), 57.

³⁰ Marx, *Early Writings*: 383-4.

³¹ Marx, *Early Writings*: 387.

³² Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour*, 63.

human nature, to self-consciousness.”³³ Overcoming estrangement is, for Hegel, the overcoming of objectivity and vice-versa. Estrangement does not come from the object, but, rather, the object merely appears estranged from the point of view of a form of consciousness estranged from itself.

For Hegel, self-estrangement is necessary insofar in producing its object spirit posits itself objectively. Spirit must alienate itself in the object before it can appropriate that object into consciousness and, in turn, achieve self-actualisation. Hegel pulls back the curtain on the semblance of strangeness that these objects possesses and demonstrates the necessity of spirit’s self-alienating activity and the re-appropriation of the object in the process of self-actualisation.³⁴ Once the conscious origin of the estranged object is recognised estrangement is overcome. As Marx points out, however, this process occurs within consciousness: “The appropriation of man’s objectified and estranged essential powers is therefore... only an *appropriation* which takes place in *consciousness*, in pure thought, i.e. in *abstraction*.”³⁵ This solution to estrangement, therefore, contains an inherent problem that was raised by Feuerbach in the previous section: the sublation of objectivity and estrangement within self-consciousness is merely the subjective overcoming of estrangement within abstract thought. If the object of consciousness is objectified self-consciousness, then the object of thought is only thought itself. All that is required is a change within consciousness; a recognition that the estranged object is merely objectified consciousness.³⁶ In short, for Hegel estrangement qua self-objectification is a necessary part of the movement of self-consciousness. Spirit produces and comes to know itself through its self-objectifying labour. Labour is seen as the ontological grounds of spirit’s self-actualisation.

In order to understand Marx’s critique of Hegel on this point, it is necessary to grasp Hegel’s understanding of labour. For Marx, Hegel’s conception of labour is one-sided because of its formalistic character. Hegel offers an account of labour in general, rather than an account of labour in its particularity. Labour in Hegel is the ground for spirit’s self-actualisation. As such, estrangement is not overcome practically through labour since all

³³ Marx, *Early Writings*: 386-7.

³⁴ Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour*: 62.

³⁵ Marx, *Early Writings*., 384.

³⁶ Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour*: 61. Chris Arthur puts this well: “a *change in attitude* abolishes the consciousness of estrangement because estrangement itself is understood only as an attitude towards the world adopted by consciousness.”

labour is conceived as necessarily positive and productive, but formally and negatively through a change in consciousness. As Marx claims, through the process of self-consciousness spirit becomes conscious of reality as a product of its own creation. Through this process spirit is able to feel at home in reality. However, for Marx, this awareness is not enough: “*reason is at home in unreason*. Man, who has realized that in law, politics, etc., he leads an alienated life, leads his true human life in this alienated life as such.”³⁷ In demonstrating the essence of the estranged object to be self-alienated consciousness, spirit has transcended the appearance of estrangement. In other words, Hegel is able to overcome estrangement by leaving things just as they are. He overcomes the estrangement of consciousness from its object without any real change in the object, i.e. without fundamentally changing reality or society. Estrangement is conceived as a moment that is resolved in the process of spirit’s self-actualisation. As Marx writes about Hegel’s conception of labour, it is “*man’s coming to be for himself within alienation or as alienated man*.”³⁸ Hegel’s critique of estrangement is, therefore, a kind of pseudo-critique. In Feuerbachian terms, he has overcome estrangement formally from within the standpoint of abstract thought. Spirit is able to find itself at home in an alienated world qua self-estrangement.

Hegel’s mode of overcoming estrangement is not simply an error on his part. Rather, it needs to be seen as a result of his complex conception of reality. As Helmut Reichelt claims, Hegel disputes traditional philosophical conceptions of reality that mark a distinction between a sensuous world of appearance and a supersensuous world of essence. In response to these two-world theories, Hegel offers a conception of reality in which “the supersensible world of essence is gradually transcended in favour of a second supersensible world, which in its reality encompasses the sensuous world and contains within itself, while maintaining their difference, both the sensuous and the first supersensible world.”³⁹ This is a very complex account, but, at its core, Hegel’s new conception of reality can be seen as composed of two contradictory moments that must be grasped as a dynamic process. The supersensible essence appears but, in turn, hides itself in that appearance. The second form of appearance is not mere appearance as a form of illusion, but *objective appearance* in which

³⁷ Marx, *Early Writings*: 393. [My Emphasis]

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 386.

³⁹ Helmut Reichelt, “Social Reality as Appearance: Some Notes on Marx’s Concept of Reality” in Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis (ed.) *Human Dignity, Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism* (London: Aldershot, 2005), 32.

essence and appearance exist as two moments within the movement of the whole. Reichelt views the difference between Marx and Hegel in Marx's conception of essence, specifically the claim that within the movement in which essence appears it comes to appear in an inverted form. I will attempt to clarify this through Marx's account of labour and the state that rests on a particular interpretation of Hegel's conception of reality.

This contradictory process can be seen quite clearly in Marx's conception of labour in the *EPM*. The worker objectifies himself through his labour, yet the product of his labour takes on the appearance of an estranged objectivity. The more the worker objectifies himself in the object the more the world of objects takes on a life of their own external to the worker: "The product of labour is labour which has been objectified in a thing."⁴⁰ From this perspective it is impossible to separate finite products of labour from their appearance as an estranged world of things. In the thing, the mediation between the worker and the nature from which the thing is produced becomes suppressed.⁴¹ The thing—a compound of human labour and nature—confronts the worker as objective and external to him. In this process, man's essence—the objectivity that Feuerbach had asserted—is extinguished and as result of this process nature reappears as a *second nature*. This second nature is the objective and alien world of things.

Hegel, as I noted, offers a solution to this problem, albeit a formal one. This is described by Christopher J. Arthur as the tragedy of Hegel's conflation of alienation of estrangement: "the necessity of spirit's odyssey of self-objectification becomes at the same time its self-estrangement, and scientific criticism is powerless to do more than point to the content hidden behind the forms of estrangement and pass off this insight as their sublation."⁴² If we bring this together with Reichelt's description of Hegel's conception of reality, it becomes clear that the human essence does appear objectively in the externalised world of autonomous objects. However, it does so in an inverted and displaced way. Therefore, insofar as Hegel is describing the process of labour as it appears in capitalism and the bourgeois state he is quite correct. However, for Marx, Hegel errs in making the finite concept of labour—labour under capitalism—the basis of the concept of labour in general.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁴¹ Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, 67.

⁴² Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour*, 68. As Marx states in the *EPM*, the "forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into 'self-consciousness'."

Like labour, the form of the bourgeois state is conceived on the basis of the movement of opposites between an essential free self-determining subject and the independent appearance of autonomous political power. The essence of the state—the independent individual—appears in an inverted form in the domination of the individual by state power. The autonomy of the power of the state is the inversion of the free self-determining subject⁴³, just as in labour the domination of the worker by the world of things is the inversion of his self-determining labour. This inversion is characteristic of political economy. As Marx states, "[s]ince they make private property in its active form the subject, thereby making man as a non-being [*Unwesen*] the essence, the contradiction in reality corresponds entirely to the contradictory essence which they have accepted as their principle."⁴⁴ The principle, abstracted from the inverted world, is elevated to the status of a concept—labour in general. As such, the real existing contradictions come to be formally and logically justified.

For Marx, Hegel short-circuits his critical analysis when he makes reason at home within the actually existing contradiction between the state and the individual and the worker and the products of his labour. The question is, as Reichelt puts it, “whether reason is already real.”⁴⁵ For Marx, Hegel’s analysis of the state contains an unfortunate mix of positivism—when it treats existing forms as absolutes—and mysticism—when it treats those forms as logically a priori and necessary. Rather, what is necessary is a genetic account of these forms. Like Feuerbach’s critique of religion, Marx will reveal that the essence of these forms is the social content that is hidden in their objective appearance. However, it is not enough to merely point out the human content within the forms of appearance; these contradictions must be overcome through human practice.

What are the limits of the young Marx’s approach? Simply put, he remains within the influence of Feuerbach and the young Hegelians. He retains a conception of the human essence that is abstract from its form of appearance. The result, as Reichelt claims, is that Marx can only present an alternative to the inverted world as a “mirror image of what emancipated Man, emancipated from his alienated, inverted world, might mean.”⁴⁶ Marx posits communism as the practical re-appropriation of species-being and the transcendence

⁴³ Reichelt, “Social Reality as Appearance”: 34.

⁴⁴ Marx, *Early Writings*: 343

⁴⁵ Reichelt, “Social Reality as Appearance”: 35.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

of the alienated world.⁴⁷ As an objective form of appearance, however, the alienated world cannot be overcome abstractly; if reality is a movement of contradictions—essence and appearance—any attempt to posit a conception of essence in contradistinction to its form of existence would be one-sided.

There exists an internal contradiction within Marx's conception of communism in the *EPM*. On the one hand, Marx's critique of Hegel reveals that the inverted world, which idealism can only examine abstractly, must be overcome practically. On the other hand, Marx posits a positive conception of the human essence as the 'mirror world' of the existing alienated reality. The alien world of things is opposed to the true human essence. What Marx will come to realise is that Feuerbach's conception of the human essence is an abstraction from the existing reality. Conceived in this way, the inverted world is the necessary form of appearance of a particular set of social relations. Thus, this form of social relations cannot be criticised externally in the manner Marx proposes in the *EPM*. Marx points towards this in his 1843 critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: "true philosophical criticism of the present state constitution not only shows the contradictions as existing, but clarifies them, grasps their genesis and necessity."⁴⁸ Genesis, however, must be more than the formal-logical description of estrangement, it must account for its concrete-historical development.

It is necessary for Marx to move from the level of ideology to a conception of society as a real movement.⁴⁹ As Arthur claims, at this point Marx's theory does not evolve from the proletariat, i.e. real estrangement. Rather, for Arthur, the proletariat is attached in "a mechanical way... to this theoretical criticism. It is a marriage of convenience, not a real union."⁵⁰ The limits of both the Hegelian and the Feuerbachian method are that they remain formal analyses of the problem. Even though Feuerbach claims to descend to the level of concrete particularity, Marx comes to recognise that Feuerbach's conception of both man and nature remains abstract. In demonstrating the necessity of both a historical and logical analysis, Marx comes to distinguish his materialism from both Feuerbach and the scientific materialists that I examined in the previous chapter.

⁴⁷ Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Capital*, trans. Alex Locascio. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 22.

⁴⁸ Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour*: 112.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

Marx disputes the one-sided conception of essence in the critique of Feuerbach he puts forward in *On Feuerbach* and the *German Ideology*. This internal contradiction within Marx's thought requires him to embark on a critique of Feuerbach and young Hegelianism that is, at the same time, a form of self-criticism. In addition, in these texts he puts forward the fundamental premises of the materialist conception of history. While I claim that Marx breaks with Feuerbach on a number of issues, I do not accept Althusser's contention that there is a fundamental epistemological break at this point in Marx's work. Rather, Marx engages in a process of self-criticism that only makes sense when examined in light of the early work. Accordingly, he retains some of the elements he develops in the EPM while, at the same time, refining and developing them.⁵¹ Therefore, it is possible to claim that he drops concepts such as alienation and species-being while admitting he retains certain aspects of his early work, in particular the notion of an inverted world and the overall problematic of social domination. In this, I agree with Lucio Colletti that both Marx's *historical materialism* and the logic of *Capital* are rooted in the conception of the *social relations of production* that are developed in embryonic form in the EPM.⁵²

2.3 The Problem of Empiricism in *The German Ideology*

In the previous section, I alluded to the fact that Feuerbach's conception of human essence, adopted by Marx, represents an internal limit of Marx's position in the EPM. It is not surprising that in the texts that follow Marx criticises Feuerbach precisely on the point. As Marx states in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, "the essence of man is no abstraction

⁵¹ Reichelt, "Social Reality as Appearance": 38. Reichelt disputes Althusser's claim that in Marx's later work he drops any reference to Hegel's conception of appearance: "In the *German Ideology*, which is argued in pointedly non-philosophical terms, its [Hegel's conception of reality] is summarised succinctly in the last section on the chapter on Feuerbach: 'The reality which communism is creating, is precisely the true basis of rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individual, insofar as *reality is only the product of the preceding intercourse of individual themselves*.'" [My emphasis] As I will go on to show, Marx's critical engagement with Hegel's conception of reality and the relationship between essence and appearance underlies his analysis of the commodity in *Capital*. Further, Marx's conception of reality as an 'inverted world' points to the fundamental inadequacy of both traditional idealism and materialism.

⁵² Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel*. (London: Verso, 1973), 232-4. See also, Reichelt, "Social Reality as Appearance": 38. Reichelt argues for a level of consistency between the EPM and the *German Ideology* when he states that, "the basic issue of the materialist conception of history, the so-called dialectics between the forces of productions and the relations of production, only repeats in different words those same thoughts of the *Paris Manuscripts*." It is necessary to find a middle-ground between positing a strict break in Marx's thought and a position that aims to reconstruct Marx's thought as a theoretical whole, i.e. the original project of the *Neue Marx Lektüre*.

inherent in each single individual. *In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations.*”⁵³ Here we find the central difference between the two thinkers: Marx is asserting that it is impossible to abstract a notion of human essence that is completely divorced from its existence within the specific social context of a historical epoch. Feuerbach’s critique of religion aimed at demonstrating that the essence of religion is nothing other than man’s self-alienated essence. For Feuerbach, the resolution of the religious essence into the human essence is the overcoming of man’s self-alienation. The irony of Feuerbach’s approach is that he does not recognise that his conception of the human essence is an essential presupposition: “Feuerbach... does not see that the ‘religious sentiment [*Gemüt*] is itself a social product, and the abstract individual which he analyses belong to a particular form of society.”⁵⁴

Feuerbach’s human essence is the same historically determined conception of man present, in an inverted form, in the bourgeois state and economics—the abstract individual. With Feuerbach, the concept Man is substituted for empirical man. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Feuerbach is dealing with Man in the particular rather than as a universal concept such as spirit or self-consciousness. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how the formal inversion of the particular over the universal overcomes the actual relationship of domination present in capitalism. Or, in other words, the domination of the universal over the particular that Marx locates in both the domination of the state power over the individual and the domination of the world of things over the proletarian. Feuerbach merely inverts the Hegelian whole—spirit or self-consciousness—into a totality of particular individuals. I take this to be the meaning of Marx’s claim that Feuerbach and all previous forms of materialism remain at the level of civil society. From this standpoint, society can only be examined as a ‘thing’ external to the individuals that comprise it.⁵⁵ According to Marx’s conception, society is no longer to be viewed as the totality of private individuals united naturally through a fixed “mute, general” notion of species or essence that is inherent in each isolated individual.⁵⁶ This ideal unity is never actualised; it is contradicted in the reality of the inverted world. In contrast, Marx views society as a

⁵³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart: 1975), 4. [My emphasis]

⁵⁴ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 4.

⁵⁵ Ibid, “Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular world. His work consists of resolving the religious world into its secular basis. That secular basis lifts itself off from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis.”

⁵⁶ Ibid.

process, as a movement of social relations⁵⁷ that must be grasped concretely in actual social practices: “The standpoint of old materialism is civil society, the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity.”⁵⁸

All Marx does, at this point, is to indicate the necessity of a new approach. The actual premises will come later in the *German Ideology*. Before moving onto this text, two main points should be taken away from this preliminary critique of Feuerbach. First, Marx’s conception of the ensemble of social relations is fundamentally different than Feuerbach’s abstract man. Second, Marx is developing a general critique of what could be referred to as *essence thinking*. As I demonstrated in my introduction, Marx’s concern with the relationship between essence and appearance and, in turn, the nature of reality has been a central concern since his doctoral dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus. When I speak of a new starting-point for Marxian materialism I mean a materialist analysis free from abstract principles divorced from their existence in social reality.⁵⁹ In other words, this form of analysis bases itself in a conception of society as a real movement. As such, society is conceived of as both subject and object, real and ideal. It is not a ‘thing’ that can be examined externally, but must be grasped as a product of concrete sensuous human practices. This conception of society will lead Marx to criticise the grounds of the science of political economy, a development I will discuss in the final section on *Capital*.

In the *German Ideology* where Marx develops the critique of Feuerbach in greater detail. At the same time, the relationship between the “Theses” and this text seems overdetermined. Phrases such as “ensemble of social relations” and “social humanity” are dropped. Therefore, rather than a natural continuity between these texts there appears to be an element of discontinuity between the “Theses” and Marx’s later work. In particular, Marx moves even further away from philosophical terminology in the *German Ideology*. Thus, while he develops some of the themes presented in the “Theses” there is also both a descent down the ladder of abstraction and a greater theoretical sophistication in the work that follows. This is the reason that I consciously avoid treating either the “Theses” or the *German Ideology* as the Rosetta Stone of theoretical Marxism. Despite the fact that these texts deal explicitly with philosophers and philosophy, they lack the depth of Marx’s later

⁵⁷ See Peter Osborne, *How to Read Marx*. (London: Granta Books, 2014), 30. Peter Osborne points out that “[i]t is the relational and hence, ironically, ‘ideal’ character of society that moves Marx’s idea beyond all previous, old materialisms.”

⁵⁸ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 5.

⁵⁹ Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Capital*: 22.

work. I return to this point at the conclusion of this section when I talk about the limits of Marx's conception of practice in both the "Theses" and the *German Ideology*. For now, let's examine the content of the *German Ideology* in further detail.

Rather than, like Feuerbach, attempting to found a new philosophy that fulfils the demand of presuppositionless thought, Marx begins by self-consciously positing a necessary presupposition.⁶⁰ For Marx, "the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature."⁶¹ This basic premise represents a new starting-point for the materialist analysis of society. It is also markedly different from the position Marx took in the *EPM*, where he lays out an alternative "mirror image" of the alienated world and posits its transcendence.⁶² At the core of Marx's analysis is a new conception of the relationship between consciousness and nature. To a certain extent, this has its basis in the Feuerbachian claim that man and nature are objective and, hence, non-identical. As such, nature is not reducible to mere subjective semblance. Marx goes beyond Feuerbach by viewing nature as both subject and object. As subject, nature does not confront human beings as a static world of dead objectivity, but as transformed and transformable through human practice. At the same time, as Schmidt claims, while "reality... ceases to be a merely contemplatively 'given', it still remains an existing *objective world* in itself, precisely as human mediated."⁶³

Marx's complex conception of the relationship between men and nature is hinted at in the *EPM* when he echoes the Feuerbachian conception of the dialogue between the subject the physical world: "Man *lives* from nature, i.e. nature is his *body*, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die."⁶⁴ However, Marx is already beginning to point towards an account of the social mediation of relationship between nature and consciousness that goes beyond Feuerbach. For Marx, even the senses—the organs of sensuous immediacy—are socially mediated: "The eye has become a *human* eye,

⁶⁰ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 41. The fundamental presupposition is *life* and, as Marx states, "life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things".

⁶¹ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 39.

⁶² Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Capital*: 22. As Michael Heinrich puts it, "[t]he really existing social relations under which people live and work became the object of investigation." It is in light of this that the problem of alienation becomes less prevalent and the material conditions under which people live takes the place of an abstract notion of alienation.

⁶³ Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*: 159.

⁶⁴ Marx, *Early Writings*: 328.

just as the object has become a social, *human* object, made for man by man.”⁶⁵ Or, similarly, “[m]an is... affirmed in the objective would not only in thought but with *all* the senses.”⁶⁶ Not only is the consciousness of social man different from non-social man, but, for Marx, society conditions his perception of the world: “The senses of social man are different from non-social man.”⁶⁷ Even in the *EPM*, Marx is pointing towards a complex and differentiated conception of the relationship of man and nature that differs from the immediate unity posited by Feuerbach.

What differs between the *EPM* and the works that immediately follow it? Most importantly, there is a sense in which Marx concedes that nature confronts the subject immediately, but the form of nature that confronts the subject is not pure first nature, but a form of nature that has already undergone social mediation. There is no concept of man or nature that can be fully abstracted from the social relations of production from within which it was produced. Feuerbach fails to recognise the social character of nature itself; Feuerbach’s immediate unity between man and nature—something characteristic of materialism more generally—is not an ontological fact, but a product of a particular set of social relations. Any relationship between the subject and nature must be mediated by the position that subject occupies within the relations of production. Thus, Marx’s materialism cannot be reduced to an empiricist identity of human beings and nature.

For Marx, sense perception is historically and socially mediated. While Feuerbach is eager to return to sense-certainty, he misses the fact that the object of sense perception—nature—contains a historical element: “The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit trees, was... only a few centuries ago transplanted by *commerce* into our zone, and therefore only *by* this action of a definite society in a definite age has it become ‘sensuous certainty’ for Feuerbach.”⁶⁸ Even the senses contain a historical content, they are conditioned historically; what confronts the senses as something apparently unchanging, may have a temporal origin. The intrinsic limit of Feuerbach’s brand of sense-certainty is that it can only perceive what confronts it immediately, but, for Marx, what confronts it immediately is not without social and historical mediation: “The cultivation of the five senses is the work of all previous history.”⁶⁹ Not only are Hegel’s universal ‘Here’ and ‘Now’ of a

⁶⁵ Ibid., 352.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 353.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Marx and Engels, *Marx: Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 39

⁶⁹ Marx, *Early Writings*: 353.

product of particular concrete ‘heres’ and ‘nows’ as Feuerbach would have it; the object of those conceptualisations are products of particular social relations of production. This becomes clear in Feuerbach’s conception of ‘man’. While Marx credits Feuerbach with recognizing the objectivity of human beings, his conception fixes man as a mere object. He conceives man as an object of contemplation and, therefore, “never arrives at the actually existing, active men, but stops at the abstraction ‘man’.”⁷⁰ Against this fixed conception, Marx stresses the subjective and objective characteristics of both the subject—man—and his object—nature.

Unlike Feuerbach, who stresses the objectivity of nature, Marx demonstrates the duality of nature as both subject and object. For Marx, the concepts of both ‘man’ and ‘nature’ arise through the dialectic of labour. As Schmidt states, “A fixed, objective world, which makes itself independent of individual men, emerges from the relation of Subject and Object in labour.”⁷¹ Nature as it confronts human beings is a necessary result of a relationship of mediation. Neither human beings nor nature are purely objective; both take the position of subject and object in the overall movement. I will now demonstrate how Marx characterises this in non-philosophical terms.

For Marx, the fundamental precondition for human beings to make history is that they must be in a “position to live”.⁷² Above all, this means that human beings must be in a position to satisfy basic needs such as eating, drinking, shelter and clothing. This satisfaction of needs demands a certain level of intercourse with nature. Nature is, therefore, never merely object, pure in its autonomy, but subject as well. Through their productive activity, human beings disturb nature’s autonomy, imposing their subjective will, de-forming nature to satisfy their needs. This activity shapes nature, the objective world that confronts the human subject. At the same time, human beings are transformed in the process.

The form of nature that confronts human beings undergoes a constant process of transformation and the idea that the nature that confronts human beings is pure and undifferentiated is pure fantasy. As Marx says of Feuerbach, “the nature that preceded history, is not by any means the nature in which Feuerbach lives, it is nature which today no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral islands of recent

⁷⁰ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 39

⁷¹ Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*: 119

⁷² Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 41.

origin) and which, therefore, does not exist for Feuerbach either.”⁷³ Feuerbach shares with pre-Marxian materialism a conception of nature that is ontologically separate from society. Marx, in contrast, claims that, in their labour, men move from the immediacy of natural existence to a mediated, i.e. social, relationship with nature.

Just as nature has been formed through the interruption of human practice, consciousness comes to be shaped through a practical intercourse with nature. As Schmidt writes, “In their labour, men act at once as sensualist materialists and subjective idealists. They act as sensualist materialists because they have to stand the test of the material, which inflexibly preserves its autonomy... They act as subjective idealists when the subject nature to their purposes.”⁷⁴ It is on this point that Marx’s materialism transcends any previous form. It becomes impossible to isolate the two moments in the dialectic of labour. Existence can only be understood as the result of the dynamic intercourse between human beings and nature in which both occupy, under different conditions, the position of subject and object. Any attempt to abstract either of these two moments causes one side to become static. Here is where the limit of Feuerbach’s materialism becomes apparent: “As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist.”⁷⁵ In seeing these objects in their sensuous immediacy, Feuerbach fails to recognise that what he perceives as pure nature has already undergone a process of transformation. Sense-certainty can only grasp appearance as appearance. In doing so, it falls into the trap of mistaking second nature—nature mediated through social relations—for pure unadulterated first nature. If we take seriously the conception of reality in which essence hides itself in appearance this conception of reality will always fall short since by its very nature it remain at the level of mere appearance.

Marx recognises that Feuerbach goes as far any theorist can in claiming that man’s being is posited by his essence.⁷⁶ The mode of life of both humans and animals is one in which their essence is satisfied. For Feuerbach, this satisfaction occurs in his particular conception of nature that Marx criticises for being ideal. For Marx, he both accepts and

⁷³ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁴ Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*: 115.

⁷⁵ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*, 41.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 13. Engels’ quotes Feuerbach: “Being is not a general concept which can be separated from things. It is *identical* with the things that exist... Being is posited by essence... The fish is in the water, but its essence cannot be separated from this being.”

misunderstands the nature of the existing reality. Marx illustrates this quite nicely with the example of the fish:

The “essence” of the fish is its “being”, water—to go no further than this one proposition. The “essence” of the freshwater fish is the water of the river. But the latter ceases to be the “essence” of the fish and is no longer a suitable medium of existence as soon as the river is made to serve industry, as soon as it is polluted by dyes and other waste products and navigated by steamboats, or as soon as its water is diverted into canals where simple drainage can deprive the fish of its medium of existence.⁷⁷

When Feuerbach takes refuge in a nature that has not been “subdued by men” he fails to recognise that this nature is steadily disappearing. If this pure nature is the condition of existence for men to find their essence satisfied, the vast majority of people live in conditions in which they are and always will be estranged from their essence. It is in light of this that Marx criticises the Young Hegelians for grasping the real contradictions in existence, but merely conceiving these “as an unhappy chance, as an abnormality that cannot be altered.”⁷⁸ In this conception, nature and existence are conceived separately and, therefore, being and essence can only be reconciled speculatively while the real contradictions of existence remain untouched.

For Marx, in contrast, nature contains a historical element and, as such, nature and existence are inseparable. As he states in an aside about Bruno Bauer: “Even when the sensuous world is reduced to a minimum to a stick... it presupposes the action of producing this stick. Therefore in any conception of history one has first of all to observe this fundamental fact in all its significance and all its implications and to accord it its due importance.”⁷⁹ Even the passive appropriation of nature in thought contains an element of its transformation. It is true that the material of nature exists independently of man, but its form can only be separated from reality through abstraction, i.e. in thought.⁸⁰ This is the mistake made by Feuerbach and also the form of empiricism I examined in the previous chapter: they both posit nature as a principle that exists objectively outside of society and history. Despite Feuerbach’s objections to metaphysical materialism, taking him as their starting point does, therefore, make some sense. And, for Marx, this shared idealised conception of nature must be superceded for both a concept of history and of nature that contains mediated relationship between sensuous human activity and nature.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 58-9.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁹ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 42.

⁸⁰ Schmidt, *Concept of Nature in Marx*: 120. As Schmidt notes, Marx follows Kant in this regard: “In Marx, as in Kant, the form and the matter of the phenomenal world can be separated *in abstracto*, but not in reality.”

The objectivity of the nature that confronts human beings has been interrupted by the social activity of successive generations. Nature is eminently historical. On the one hand, nature preserves its autonomy and objectivity, but, on the other, this is constantly interrupted by its appropriation by human beings. The relationship between humans and nature is historically determined and in a process of constant change. Nature, essence, and so on do not exist as a 'true reality' independent and opposed to the social practice of human beings. It is in this light that Marx states the aim of communism: "The reality which communism creates is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals, insofar as reality is nevertheless only the product of the preceding intercourse of individuals."⁸¹

The truth of the reality that confronts human beings is that it is a product of the history of sensuous human practice. As Marx states, "[t]his sum of productive forces, capital funds and social forms of intercourse, which every individual and generation finds in existence as something given, is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as 'substance' and 'essence of man', and what they have deified and attacked."⁸² What is theoretically interesting here is that these productive forces are, on the one hand, immediately given and, on the other hand, conceived of as a totality of social relations. They are both immediate and understandable only conceptually, i.e. reflectively. The immediacy of empiricism and the conceptual abstraction of idealism appear to co-exist as two contradictory moments within the whole of Marx's conception of society.

For Marx, the proper starting point for the materialist conception of history, as I have said, are empirically graspable social relations. For the historical materialist, "history ceases to be a collection of dead facts, as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists."⁸³ Marx's materialism cannot be reduced to a form of empiricism or idealism, although it retains elements of both. On the one hand, it is empirical in that it begins with the objectivity of existing social relations. The grounds of knowledge must be what can be empirically ascertained. On the other hand, for Marx reality contains a subjective element as well. As I stated above, reality

⁸¹ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 81. See also, "Social Reality as Appearance", 38. This text is frequently quoted by Reichelt as an example of the continuity between Marx's reliance on the Hegelian interpretation of reality as a form second immediacy in which essence is hidden and the conception of social reality he offers in *Capital*.

⁸² Ibid., 42

⁸³ Ibid., 37.

is conceived as the product of the historical intercourse of individuals. Despite this advance over both idealism and empiricism, there remain some inconsistencies within Marx's conception of reality at this point. Specifically, Marx does not seem to disassociate himself adequately from empiricism.

Marx's failure to adequately differentiate his conception of the relationship between ideas and reality from that of empiricism can be seen most clearly in the emphasis he places on practice in both the "Theses" and the *German Ideology*. As Michael Heinrich claims, "nowhere else with Marx can one find a tension, not to speak of a mutual exclusion, between 'interpretation' and 'change'."⁸⁴ On the surface, this appears to be a curious claim since much of the literature is based precisely on such a distinction. Further, it seems obvious to the reader of the *German Ideology* that such a distinction is precisely the charge he makes against the Young Hegelians. That said, practice does occupy a curious place in these texts. For instance, we should ask: what is the theoretical content of 'practice'? At this stage it is basically nil; it is neither the founding statement of a new theory of society and history or the practical overcoming of philosophy. In these texts, practice stands for the one-sided inversion of theoretical abstraction that itself remains abstract. As Heinrich claims, in the "Theses" and the *German Ideology* "'practice' is initially nothing more than an empty formula [*"Praxis" ist aber zunächst einmal nichts weiter als eine Leerformel*]."⁸⁵ In other words, practice stands in for the concrete empirical in contrast to the abstract philosophical. As 'practice', however, it remains devoid of all content. It is in light of this that the project of the *German Ideology* makes sense; to supplement the empty phrase of the "Theses" with the "empirically ascertainable [*empirisch konstatierbaren*]". Real people and their social relations are substituted for the philosophical abstractions of the Young Hegelians.

Within this conception is the implicit claim that there is a 'true' knowledge of the social totality that exists beyond any conceptual construction. It is here that Marx's materialism comes closest to a form of empiricism. Heinrich develops this in more detail in his text *Praxis und Fetischismus*. For him, the concept of practice Marx presents in the

⁸⁴Michael Heinrich, "Invaders from Marx", trans. Angelus Novus. Jungle World No. 38, September 21, 2005. <<http://www.lettersjournal.org/invadersfrommarx.html>>.

⁸⁵Michael Heinrich, "Praxis und Fetischismus: Eine Anmerkung zu den Marxschen Thesen über Feuerbach und ihrer Verwendung" in Christoph Engemann u.a. (Hrsg.), *Gesellschaft als Verkehrung. Perspektiven einer neuen Marx-Lektüre. Festschrift für Helmut Reichelt*, (Freiburg: ca ira Verlag 2004), 249-270.

<<http://www.oekonomiekritik.de/311Praxis%20u%20Fetischismus.htm>> This text has not been translated into English. The translation of this text and any mistakes are my own.

“Theses” the *German Ideology* need to be assessed from the within the conception of reality contained in *Capital*. As he claims,

[a]gainst the background of the critique of political economy the concept of practice in the “Theses on Feuerbach” and the *German Ideology*, as a synonym for the empirical that should resolve all mystification, is proven to be a pre-critical term: practice itself, as it is empirically shown, is caught up in mystifications. Practice is not the transparent explanation [*Erklärungsgrund*] which all is referred to [*auf den alles zurückzuführen*], but is itself a matter for explanation [*Erklärungsgegenstand*].⁸⁶

As in the *EPM*, Marx locates the overcoming of the contradictions within reality through practice. Thus, there appears to be a central contradiction between the inadequacy of empiricism that Marx perceives in all forms of materialism and the demand for the immediate supercession of mystifications and contradictions in reality immediately through practice. This can be seen in his criticism of Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians who conceive of the contradiction between men’s essence and being as an unhappy chance: “These millions of proletarians or communists... think quite differently and will bring their ‘being’ into harmony with their ‘essence’ in a practical way, by means of a revolution.”⁸⁷ This begins from the assumption that social relations are immediately transparent. As I suggested above, this is the basic presupposition of the form of materialism Marx develops in the *German Ideology*. The object of investigation is real social relations and these social relations are substituted for the conceptual abstractions of the philosophers. The empty phrases of the philosopher are filled with an empirical content.

It is difficult to see, within Marx’s own framework, how this form of immediacy can disassociate itself completely from reality. It is true that Marx suppresses the idealist concept of nature for empirically ascertainable practice. However, Marx’s substitution of practice for theoretical abstraction results in a simplistic view of social domination. Principally, he remains at the level of the critique of ideology that is, at its core, a critique of consciousness. In the case of the *German Ideology*, it is the critique of speculative philosophical consciousness. Marx lays out his theory of social domination quite clearly: “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the *ideas of dominance*.”⁸⁸ It is not, as Feuerbach

⁸⁶ Michael Heinrich, “Praxis und Fetischismus”.

<<http://www.oekonomiekritik.de/311Praxis%20u%20Fetischismus.htm>>

⁸⁷ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 58.

⁸⁸ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 59. [My emphasis]

and the Young Hegelians would have it, the abstractions that dominate the proletariat, but other men, i.e. the ruling class. Philosophy ideally represents the concrete domination of man by man and, in doing so, it becomes mystified. Social domination is carried over into the realm of ideas by the philosopher and, in doing so, the philosopher legitimises the actually existing form of domination. In turn, ideas are separated from the ruling class and confront the proletariat as eternal laws of philosophy, nature, economics and so on.

In the *German Ideology*, these so-called laws are confronted with the ‘truth’ of sensuous objective human practice and are, supposedly, demystified. Marx rests this on a big assumption: that the structure of society is transparent and can be grasped immediately through empirical analysis. In other words, there is the assumption of an empirical world that can be examined independently of conceptual reflection. Ideas, abstractions, and all the other tools of the philosopher merely mask the truth of what can be ascertained empirically. The result is a conception of the ruling class as a cohesive whole whose own practices are immediately transparent from the correct scientific perspective. This, I would say, grasps capitalism merely at the level of appearance.

While Marx is correct to assert that social relations are the proper starting-point for a materialist analysis of society, it seems that his concept of practice regresses to the form of sense-certainty he criticised in Feuerbach. This empiricism is echoed in the *Holy Family* which was also written in 1845: “If man draws all his knowledge, sensation, etc., from the world of the senses and the experience gained in it, then what has to be done is to arrange the empirical world in such a way that man experiences and becomes accustomed to what is truly human in it and that he becomes aware of himself as man.”⁸⁹ The confluence of the practical and the empirical finds its apotheosis in the *Communist Manifesto*: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”⁹⁰ Above all, what is necessary for Marx, at this point, is the correct scientific description of reality as the totality of sensuous human activity. This seems too simplistic. While it is crucial to understand that ideas and concepts have an empirical basis, that recognition on its own is not enough.

⁸⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and Family*. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956).

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/ch06_3_d.htm>

⁹⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Selected Works: Volume 1*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969).

<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>>

Marx's presents a far more sophisticated notion of conceptuality in *Capital* that builds off of both the *EPM* and these more empirically inclined texts.

At this stage, Marx's conception of practice is inconsistent: on the one hand, he offers a rich conception of society and history as the "preceding intercourse of individuals"; on the other hand, the standpoint of practice is meant to grasp this ideal totality immediately. Accordingly, the structure of society is held to be immediately transparent in the experience of sensuous human activity. From this position, it seems as if it is the manipulations of the ruling class that mask the "real conditions". Thus, in occupying the position of the worker or the perspective of sensuous human activity we are able to grasp the true reality of capitalism. This, however, is based on the assumption that practice can be conceived in pure opposition to the existing social reality. The 'true' reality exists both within and outside the existing reality. Practice must both transcend the estrangement and domination characteristic of the reality of capitalism and exist immanently within it; it is both the truth-content of the current reality and its negation. Marx's position here is both powerful and seductive, but it rests on a big assumption: that *the immediacy of practice can be conceived independently of the process of domination that has constituted all previous history and society*. In doing so, Marx forgoes any discussion of the genesis of the social relations of domination that constitutes the present reality and begins from its immediate appearance grasped from the point of view of practice.

In giving everyday experience so much weight, Marx veers too closely to Feuerbach's uneasy configuration of idealism and empiricism. The inverted world of capitalism is not conceived as something mysterious and elusive, but something penetrable through correct scientific description: "If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-processes as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process."⁹¹ This assumes a privileged historical position in which the totality of human history and specific social relations can be reduced to a simple relationship of domination of man by man. Despite this, Marx's great achievement here is that he grasps the empirical and social origin of the abstract categories of the philosophers.

⁹¹ Marx and Engels, *Marx Engels Complete Works: Volume 5*: 36. In a footnote: "The ideas which these individual form are ideas about their relation to nature or about their mutual relations or about their own nature. It is evident that in all these cases their ideas are the conscious expression—real or illusory—of their real relations and activities, of their production, of their intercourse, of their social and political conduct."

Marx begins to apply this more materialist analysis to economics in the *Poverty of Philosophy* written in 1847. There he states, “[e]conomic categories are only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions of the social relations of production.”⁹² However, even there Marx has yet to ask why these social relations among people are necessarily expressed in the form of a commodity economy. Rather, as I.I. Rubin points out, at this stage “the ‘human’ element in the economy is contrasted to the ‘material’, ‘alienated’ element just as ideal to reality.”⁹³ The antithetical relationship between the material and the human, on the one side, and the ideal and the real, on the other, is undermined in *Capital*. There, Marx shifts the problem from critique of consciousness to a genetic examination of why social relations take on a particular form of appearance under capitalist social relations. In this, as Heinrich claims, Marx does not totally abandon the form empirical research and knowledge he advocates in the *German Ideology*, but adopts the view that that no knowledge “exists beyond its conceptual construction is the most accurate view of the empirical.”⁹⁴ The notion that perception of reality is refracted conceptually is, of course, one of the key insights of Kantian idealism. I will develop this point in more detail in Chapter 3 when I deal with Benjamin’s critique of neo-Kantianism.

As I claim in the next section, the movement of reality as a whole cannot be grasped immediately by sensuous perception, but can only be grasped abstractly as a conceptual whole. Thus, Marx is unable to fully grasp the relationship between the form of domination specific to capitalism and its form of appearance in the *German Ideology* because of his reliance on the immediacy of practice as a panacea for the theoretical abstractions of idealism. It is important, therefore, to not stop at the “Theses” and the *German Ideology* for a statement of Marx’s materialism despite his pronouncements to the contrary. Rather, it is in *Capital* where we will find the most sophisticated statement of Marx’s materialism and his conception of reality.

⁹²Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the Philosophy of Poverty by M. Proudhon*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1955).

<<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/poverty-philosophy/ch02.htm>>

⁹³ Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*: 59.

⁹⁴ Michael Heinrich, “Praxis und Fetischismus”.

<<http://www.oekonomiekritik.de/311Praxis%20u%20Fetischismus.htm>>

2.4 Materialism and Idealism in Marx's Mature Thought

In the *German Ideology*, Marx moves away from the form of critique found in the *EPM*. Principally, he moves away from the idea that men are dominated by abstractions in order to move down the ladder of abstraction to concrete reality. Here is an indicative quote from the manuscripts: "As, in religion man is governed by the concoctions of his own brain, so, in capitalist production, he is governed by the concoctions of his own hand."⁹⁵ The influence of Feuerbach can be seen clearly in Marx's critique of economic alienation.

In the *German Ideology*, self-domination comes to be replaced by the domination of man by man. The question is: how does Marx's mature conception of reality in *Capital* differ from the one presented in these texts? Hans-Georg Backhaus offers a useful illustration of the difference between *Capital* and the young Marx:

The presentation of commodity fetishism which misses its essence can be thus characterized: the authors refer to some sentence from the fetishism chapter of *Capital* and interpret them, conceptually and also for the most part terminologically, in the manner of the *German Ideology*... The usual quote is "the social connections of their private labour appears as what they are i.e., not as immediate social relations of persons in their labouring activity but rather as thing-like relations of persons and social relations of things." From this quote is simply read that social relations have "made themselves autonomous" vis-a-vis humans... *The point of the critique of political economy, however, is not the mere description of this existing fact, but the analysis of its genesis.*⁹⁶

According to this conception, *Capital* contains a return to the spirit of Feuerbach's genetic method while refuting the empiricism characteristic of the "Theses" and the *German Ideology*. In a sense, the move from the *EPM* to the *German Ideology* can be viewed as a move from the apparently contradictory poles of the *abstract theoretical* and the *concrete empirical*.

In contrast, I claim that Marx's project in *Capital* represents a synthesis of these two seemingly contradictory positions. This synthesis can be grasped through an understanding of the Marx's different conception of domination present in the *EPM*, the "Theses" and the *German Ideology*, and *Capital*. In the *EPM*, the basic theme of Marx's theory of domination is the self-domination of man that comes to be objectified in the alien world of things. In the *German Ideology* domination is conceived of as the personal domination of men by men for the purposes of exploitation of their labour. Finally, in *Capital* we find a theory of the objective and impersonal domination of men by the products of their own

⁹⁵ Quoted from Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*: 141.

⁹⁶ Hans-Georg Backhaus, "Dialectics of the Value-Form", *Thesis Eleven* no.1 (1980), 103-4.

hands. Marx, therefore, breaks with the subjective character of domination in both the *EPM* and the *German Ideology*. The human practice that is reified in economic categories is not conceived of as a latent form of potentiality underlying the false objectivity of reality. Rather, human practice exists within these categories negatively or, as Werner Bonefeld puts it, “in the mode of being denied.”⁹⁷ However, as Bonefeld also notes, by its very nature reification contains a human element. Therefore, it is necessary to extract from the reified categories of economics this human content and demonstrate that the world in which human beings exist is not something separate from them, but a product of both their mutual intercourse as social individuals and the intercourse between human beings and nature.

Before examining this in detail it is helpful to begin from an understanding of the aim of *Capital*. This can be grasped from its subtitle which is “A Critique of Political Economy”. With this, Marx has already moved beyond the empiricism of his earlier work: political economy is a scientific standpoint that rests on a number of presuppositions and a priori principles.⁹⁸ The problem is that economic theory proceeds from its object without reflecting on its constitution. These theories proceed from conceptual categories that have not been interrogated adequately. Against this, Backhaus claims, “Marx’s central demand is that ‘the’ economists should not presuppose ‘categories’ or ‘forms’ but that they should instead develop them ‘genetically’.”⁹⁹ Thus, for Backhaus at least, Marx’s critique of political economy is a critique of a method that can only bring about “formal abstractions” and deals with unreflected presuppositions.

Both Backhaus and Reichelt along with more recent commentators such as Bonefeld argue that the theory underlying *Capital* is a theory of *social constitution*. The aim of the form of critique that emerges from the theory of social constitution is expressed quite nicely by Bonefeld: “The standard of critique is the human being, her dignity and possibilities.”¹⁰⁰ As I have shown, the task of this form of critique emerges: first, in the critique of the form of

⁹⁷ Werner Bonefeld, “Kapital and its Subtitle: A note of the meaning of critique”, *Capital & Class* no. 25 (2001), 58.

⁹⁸ Hans-George Backhaus, “Some Aspects of Marx’s Concept of Critique in the Context of His Economic-Philosophy theory” in ed. Werner Bonefeld and Kostas Psychopedis, *Human Dignity, Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism* (London: Aldershot, 2005), 13. As Backhaus states, “Here we are dealing with ‘non-empirical theories’ where, based on academic criteria of a theory of science, objects are referred to as ‘urphenomena’ and ‘a prioris’ that cannot be derived rationally.”

⁹⁹ Backhaus, “Some Aspects of Marx’s Concept of Critique in the Context of His Economic-Philosophy theory”: 22.

¹⁰⁰ Werner Bonefeld, “Kapital and its Subtitle: A note of the meaning of critique”: 56.

alienation and estrangement specific to capitalism: and, second, in the demand that the sensuous activity of human beings forms a reality that cannot be conceived independently of the “preceding intercourse of individuals”.

Despite this basic level of consistency, I have shown the limits of Marx’s approach in these texts. In *Capital*, however, there is a more sophisticated concept of criticism that both reveals the human content of social forms and returns the world of things to human beings while also demonstrating how social practices constitute and perpetuate the inverted topsy-turvy reality of capitalism. Accordingly, human practice is not conceptualised independently of history or society, but is deeply implicated in the constitution of social reality itself. Nor is the immediacy of practice considered a panacea for the abstractions of the philosophers or the economists.

Marx attacks the economic sciences precisely on their claim to derive their concepts immediately from their experience of the empirical world. As Backhaus states, Marx’s “central reproach against economic thought is that it assumes the ‘ready made forms’ as ‘already really existing’, that it presuppose the ‘existence’ (*Dasein*) of these forms.”¹⁰¹ The failure of the economic sciences is precisely that it fails to adequately reflect on its object—*value*. As Marx states, while the economists have uncovered the content contained in value and its magnitude they “have never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form”.¹⁰² In other words, they fail to ask why, under capital, social relations are expressed as a relationship between things. In contrast to this view, Marx asserts that his method of criticism must show the genesis of economic forms and the social relations that constitute them; the social relations which are, in turn, hidden materially in the objects that that serve as value’s necessary form of appearance—the commodity and, especially, money.

In order to examine this method it makes sense to start at the beginning, in Marx’s analysis of the commodity-form. As Marx writes in the famous opening sentence: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears [*erscheint*] as an ‘immense collection of commodities’: the individual commodity appears as its elementary form.”¹⁰³ The starting-point of *Capital* can be located in that sentence. On the

¹⁰¹ Backhaus, “Some Aspects of Marx’s Concept of Critique in the Context of His Economic-Philosophy theory”: 21.

¹⁰² Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* trans. Ben Fowkes. (London: Penguin, 1992), 174.

¹⁰³ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 125.

one hand, Marx begins empirically with the simple commodity as the elementary form of appearance of capital; on the other hand, capital is presupposed in this elementary form. Commodities only appear as the elementary form within a reality that presupposes the capitalist mode of production; things are only commodities insofar as they are objects produced for exchange. While this may be true, to stop at this elementary form, as Banaji astutely remarks, “we only examine *capital* in its most superficial or immediate aspect.”¹⁰⁴ The result of such an examination would be to fail to recognise the historical specificity of capital. This is the error made by Adam Smith who saw “the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” as a fundamental trait of human nature.¹⁰⁵

Rather than making such a presupposition, in his examination of the commodity-form Marx aims to reveal its essential determinations. Thus, instead of beginning from the pure immediacy of sense perception, in the first sentence of *Capital* Marx indicates that to adopt that starting point would be to remain within the world of mere appearance—capitalism’s own second nature. What is crucial in this formulation is that appearance is not conceived as merely contingent and opposed to the truth of essence. What Marx aims to do is examine the categories of political economy in their necessary forms of appearance.¹⁰⁶ That is to say that while the investigation must begin somewhere, the object of investigation cannot be reduced to what is immediately given in experience; reflection on the necessary presuppositions is essential. As Marx indicates, in the commodity, the most elementary form of appearance, the fundamental logic of that society is formally presupposed. Marx’s analysis in *Capital*, therefore, aims to demonstrate why the essential determinations take on this particular form of appearance under a specific set of social relations.¹⁰⁷ In contrast to the theory of alienation found in the younger Marx, the human

¹⁰⁴ Banaji, “From the Commodity to Capital: Hegel’s Dialectic in Marx’s Capital”: 30.

¹⁰⁵ See Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Capital*: 34. See also, Ellen Meiksins Wood, “The Agrarian Origins of Capitalism” in *Monthly Review* 50.4 (1998).

<<http://monthlyreview.org/1998/07/01/the-agrarian-origins-of-capitalism/>>

Ellen Meiksins Wood provides an excellent account of the historical emergence of capitalism and its specificity in her article “The Agrarian Origins of Capitalism”. The conclusion of Meiksins Wood’s historical account complements the theoretical account I’ve examined throughout this chapter. As she writes, “capitalism is not a “natural” and inevitable consequence of human nature, or even of age-old social practices like ‘truck, barter, and exchange.’ It is a late and localised product of very specific historical conditions. The expansionary drive of capitalism, to the point of virtual universality today, is not the consequence of its conformity to human nature or to some transhistorical natural laws but the product of its own historically specific internal laws of motion. And those laws of motion required vast social transformations and upheavals to set them in train. It required a transformation in the human metabolism with nature, in the provision of life’s basic necessities.”

¹⁰⁶ Banaji, “From the Commodity to Capital: Hegel’s Dialectic in Marx’s Capital”: 18.

¹⁰⁷ Hans-Georg Backhaus, “Dialectics of the Value-Form”: 102.

essence is not opposed to its form of appearance as an ideal to reality. Rather, as Rubin states, “now both opposing factors are transferred to the world as it is, to social being. The economic life of contemporary society is on the one hand a totality of social production relations, and on the other a series of ‘material’ categories in which these relations are manifested.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, we do not find the strict distinction between the material and the human or the ideal and the real that makes up much of Marx’s critique in both the *EPM* and the *German Ideology*.

The fact that the social reality of capitalism appears as an immense collection of commodities is not a delusion; it is the necessary form of appearance of the social essence. However, the social essence appears in a peculiar way in which it has quite literally become reified, i.e. turned into a thing. As such, concrete social relations between human beings become concealed in an external material relationship between things. This appearance is not a mistake or illusion, but something objective that is imprinted in human consciousness in experience and the everyday practices of individuals. In light of this, the error of political economy is in the naturalisation of what is essentially a historically determinate material social relationship between people. This historically specific relationship is elevated into to an ideal principle and separated from the determinate material reality to which it belongs. Of course, this representation contains a kernel of truth. Social relations under capital really do take on the appearance of external relationship between things; social relations in capitalism are reified in commodities and, particularly, in money. The mistake of the political economists is that they do not, however, ask how or why social relations between individuals take on this reified form under capitalism. The critique of political economy is not so much a critique of the conclusions of the political economists as a mistake or delusion. Rather, the critique is of their unreflective method; a method that hypostasises and naturalises a historically determined and determinant social relationships.¹⁰⁹

The reality of capitalism—the market, the immense heap of commodities, or however else it is described—appears external to and estranged from the social practices of individuals. Even more problematic is that this state of externality and estrangement comes to be proven in the everyday experiences and practices of individuals. It is at this point that

¹⁰⁸ Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*: 58.

¹⁰⁹ Heinrich, *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Capital*: 34-5. As Heinrich states, “[t]he naturalization and reification of social relationships is namely in no way the result of a mistake by individual economists, but rather *the result of an image of reality which develops independently as a result of the everyday practice of the members of bourgeois society*. [My emphasis]”

the question of perception comes to the fore and it is this question that is of most interest for my examination here. The question is why a particular set of concrete social relations take on an objective appearance that transcends individuals. Why does, as Marx asks, a definite social relationship between men take on “the fantastic form of a relation between things?”¹¹⁰ Or, in other words, why does the social essence take on the form of appearance of a relationship between things? This becomes clear in Marx’s examination of the fetish, but before examining that in detail I will briefly outline Marx’s conception of *value*.

2.5 Marx’s Conception of Value

Marx examines the commodity as a form that contains the double-character of a use-value and an exchange-value. Marx makes it clear that he is examining the nature of value independently of its form of appearance. This will eventually lead back to his claim that “exchange-value as the necessary mode of expression, or form of appearance, of value.”¹¹¹ What we find here, then, is a formal examination of the essence of capitalist social relations divorced from their form of appearance. It is only possible to arrive at the necessity of that form of appearance through an examination of its essence which, as I have alluded to, is social. The significance of this point will become clear as the examination proceeds.

The quality that immediately confronts our experience of the commodity is its *use-value*, but seen only in terms of its use-value the thing is not a commodity. Marx calls use-value “the physical body of the commodity”¹¹², or, later, “their plain, homely, natural form”¹¹³. Use-value is conditioned by an object’s physical properties. Insofar as I make use of the object it is only a use-value for me; it satisfies a particular need. As a use-value, the thing is not yet a commodity. In a society oriented around the production of commodities things are “also the material bearers [*Träger*] of... exchange value.”¹¹⁴ There is a distinction between the *material form* of the commodity and its *social form*. Things are only commodities insofar as they possess this double-form of being both a useful thing and valuable. At this point, however, the ability to exchange a thing for something else has nothing to do with the physical properties of the thing itself. Use is entirely abstract, it depends on subjective

¹¹⁰ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 165.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 128.

¹¹² Ibid., 126.

¹¹³ Ibid., 138

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 126.

needs.¹¹⁵ If needs are subjective, the objectivity of the commodity—its measure of worth—must have a source other than its use-value. As Marx states, “[n]ot an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values... We may twist and turn a single commodity as we will; it remains impossible to grasp as a thing possessing value.”¹¹⁶ Where does the objectivity of value come from? It is clear that it has something to do with exchange. However, exchange itself is not unique to commodity producing societies. What constitutes a capitalist society in contradistinction to pre-capitalist societies is the peculiar nature of its form of exchange.

I will try to decipher the peculiarity of the capitalist form of exchange by way of some concrete examples. It is possible to conceive of a society based purely on single qualitative exchange. Imagine that I’m a farmer in need of lumber to expand my chicken coops. I possess twenty bushels of apples that I exchange for the fifty pieces of lumber necessary to complete my renovations. In this formulation, my need for the lumber compliments the owner of the lumber mill’s need to eat. This model, however, is problematic if exchange occurs on a more regular basis. This form of exchange lacks the stability necessary for a society predicated on regular exchange since it is based on the exchange of use for use or, put in slightly different terms, the subjective equivalency of needs. The central assumption is that I will always be able to find an exchange partner to match my apples and the same for the owner of the mill. As Heinrich claims, this differs in a capitalist society based on *regular exchange*: “[f]or capitalist societies, in which exchange is the rule, we can therefore conclude: the various exchange values of the same commodity also have to constitute exchange values for each other.”¹¹⁷ Regular exchange rests on something more than use, it rests on the assumption that different things can be conceived of as equivalent things possessing *value*.

The common position in Marx’s time was the *labour theory of value*: the value of things can be measured and compared on the basis of how much labour went into their production. At first glance, Marx appears to adopt a theory of value oriented around labour. However, what differentiates him from traditional proponents of labour theory is that, for Marx, it is not concrete labour or use that makes these commodities equivalents

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 125. Marx is explicit about this: “The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference.”

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 138.

¹¹⁷ Heinrich, *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Capital*: 41.

but *abstract labour*. It is not the individual labour of particular producers that constitutes value, but the “total labour-power of society, which is manifested in the world of commodities.”¹¹⁸ The magnitude of this value is measured not by use or by the labour-time of the individual labourer, but by *socially necessary labour-time*. In the act of exchange, the commodities are not compared on the basis of any material property or even the amount of concrete labour expended on them. Rather, the substance of a commodity as bearer of value is abstract labour. The objectivity of value is an “expressions of an identical social substance, human labour... their objective character as values is therefore purely social.”¹¹⁹ The commodity does not possess value as a determinate material quality. Rather, the value-objectivity of commodities only exists insofar as commodities relate to each other in exchange.¹²⁰ As Marx states, “tailoring and weaving, although they are qualitatively different productive activities, are both a productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hand, etc., and in this sense both human labour. They are merely two different forms of the expenditure of human labour-power.”¹²¹ In order to realise commodities as values they must be exchanged. It is in the capitalistic form of exchange that qualitatively different forms of labour are made quantitatively equivalent as the aggregate of labour in the abstract.

Exchange mediates the relationship between the labour of the individual producer and the total abstract labour of society. The labour of individuals becomes abstract social labour within the act of exchange. However, this act of exchange is an abstraction from the concrete particularity of things and the labour that produced them. With the abstraction from the material body of the commodity and the concrete labour expended to produce it in the act of exchange, the value of the commodity gains the character of ‘spectral objectivity’. It is this peculiar type of objectivity, which Marx calls “purely social”, that interests me here because it is a very strange sort of objectivity that is established in contradistinction to both human beings and nature. Yet, at the same time, it appears to consciousness as something immanent and natural. It is ideal and metaphysical, but it manifests itself materially so it appears in experience as something immediately objective and valid.

¹¹⁸ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 129.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 138-9.

¹²⁰ Heinrich, *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Capital*: 54. As Heinrich states, “[i]f we attempt to locate this objectivity outside of the exchange relationship, it eludes our grasp. The objectivity of value is quite literally a ‘spectral objectivity’.”

¹²¹ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 134.

This raises a question: how can we understand the commodity as the bearer of a property—*value*—that transcends its own material existence? The objectivity of value, as I have said, is only established in the act of exchange. At the same time, however, value *appears to exist objectively outside of the exchange relationship as a material property of a thing*. Commodities are material bearers of value, material bearers of a property that transcends their finite sensuous form. How does the commodity express value? The first form by which the commodity expresses value is the simple form of value:

$$20 \text{ yards of linen} = 1 \text{ coat}$$

In this formulation, the coat—the equivalent form—serves as the material form of expression of the value of the linen—the relative form. The first commodity plays an active role, the second a passive one. In this formulation, value is expressed relatively; 20 bushels of apples = 20 bushels of apples makes no sense since a commodity cannot relate to itself as an equivalent. As the material expression of value, the coat takes on a form distinct from its natural one: “[a]s a use-value, the linen is palpably different from the coat; as value it is identical with the coat and therefore looks like the coat... Its existence as value is manifested in its equality with coat.”¹²² The form of value of the relative form is expressed in the use-value of the equivalent form. The natural body of the equivalent form expresses “something wholly different from its substance and properties... this expression itself therefore indicates that it conceals a social relation.”¹²³ This is of utmost importance for my examination here. In the value-relationship, the material form of the commodity appears to be endowed with the form of value by nature itself.¹²⁴ As an equivalent form, the product of concrete labour thus becomes the “form of manifestation of its opposite, abstract human labour.”¹²⁵ The social relationship of value gains a material embodiment in the equivalent form. Concrete labour is an expression of abstract labour and, therefore, gains a social expression even though it is done privately.

This simple form of value is limited, however, since it can only relate one commodity to another single commodity. In the expanded relative form of value every other commodity becomes “a mirror of the linen’s value.”¹²⁶ The linen is not only related to one

¹²² Ibid., 143.

¹²³ Ibid., 149.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 149. “The coat therefore, seems to be endowed with its equivalent form, its property of direct exchangeability, by nature, just as much as its property of being heavy or its ability to keep us warm.”

¹²⁵ Ibid., 150.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 155.

other kind of commodity, but with the whole world of commodities. This form has the opposite limitation; it is limited because it is a chain of equivalents that can never come to a close. As Marx states, “[i]t is true that the completed or total form of appearance of human labour is constituted by the totality of its particular forms of appearance. But in that case it has no single, unified form of appearance.”¹²⁷ The general equivalent puts this chain to a close. The general equivalent arises when one particular product of labour is habitually exchanged for other commodities. There is one commodity that expresses what is common to the whole world of commodities. This requires both the value-objectivity of the commodity and a form of *social validity*: “the general value-form, in which all the products of labour are presented as mere congealed qualities of undifferentiated human labour, shows by its very structure that it is the social expression of the world of commodities.”¹²⁸

What is so striking about the conception of value offered here is that value, which Marx stresses time and time again is not a property of the particular commodity, can be expressed as an apparently natural property of an object. However, as Heinrich puts it, “[w]hat becomes evident here is something that is not clear to everyday consciousness, but is first apparent as a result of scientific analysis: the *social character* of value expresses itself in a specifically *social* form of value.”¹²⁹ The form that follows the general equivalent—the *money-form*—is different from the general equivalent only because it is arrived at by “social custom”. There is no natural necessity in gold or silver taking this role.¹³⁰ The change from the general equivalent to the money-form is that the social relationship of value has become intertwined with the natural properties of the money commodity. With this, commodities are able to relate to each other and measure their value through a thing that sits both alongside things and outside of them; money is able to express the magnitude of value as *price*.

With the money-form the universality of exchange is established and the relationship between individual producers is totally mediated in the money commodity as price. Relations between people are externalised in a social relationship between things. As Marx recognises, what has been established here is really something quite strange: “A commodity

¹²⁷ Ibid., 157.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 159-60.

¹²⁹ Heinrich, “Introduction”, 61.

¹³⁰ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 162-3. “Gold confronts other commodities as money only because it previously confronted them as a commodity... Gradually it began to serve as universal equivalent in narrower or wider fields.”

appears *at first sight* an extremely obvious trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”¹³¹ Value is established as something objective that receives a material expression in the form of the money commodity. However, at the same time, value is something different from the commodity itself, something that is only established ideally in a relationship to the whole world of commodities. As Backhaus puts it, “[a]s something thought the value is ‘immanent’ to consciousness. In this mode of its being, however, value is not known; it counterposes itself to consciousness as something alien.”¹³² At this point, I will turn to a discussion of Marx’s conception of the *fetish* in order to underline the uneasy relationship between idealism and materialism that he sees at work in the capitalist mode of exchange.

2.6 The Concept of the Fetish

First and foremost, within Marx’s conception of the fetish we find the limit of both an empirical and a purely ideal examination of the commodity. This is due to the double-nature of the commodity itself. As a sensuous thing the commodity is fully perceptible to the senses: “It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing.”¹³³ Sensuous human activity or, in other words, the production process is immediately transparent to the senses. This was the kind of argument that I located in the *German Ideology*. This, however, is confounded once the ordinary sensuous thing is conceived of as a commodity: “as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a sensuous supersensuous thing”¹³⁴ [*sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*].”¹³⁵ As I have discussed above, in the commodity private labour takes on a social form. For Marx, the commodity reflects the social character of labour,

¹³¹ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 163. [My italics]

¹³² Backhaus, “Dialectics of the Value-Form”: 104.

¹³³ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 163.

¹³⁴ Ibid. Following Werner Bonefeld, Riccardo Bellofiore, Chris Arthur and others I have amended Fowkes’ translation of Marx’s use of “sinnlich übersinnliches” as “transcends sensuousness”. “Sensuous supersensuous” captures the double-character of the commodity as a sensuous object with a supersensible social property much more adequately.

¹³⁵ See Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel*: 278. As Colletti states, “Here Marx is saying... that the commodity is a ‘supersensate thing in a sensate matter’, a natural body (or use-value) which harbours within itself a non-material objectivity: value... [T]he commodity just like the Christian, is the unity of finite and infinite, the unity of opposites, being and non-being together.”

as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the *socio-natural properties* of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supersensuous or social.¹³⁶

From this we can grasp the double character of the commodity: it is a finite sensuous thing that expresses a supersensuous social property. Marx finds it necessary to make a religious analogy here: in religion the products of consciousness take on a life of their own and relate to men and themselves in a manner external to consciousness. The externalisation that Marx views as characteristic of religion is mirrored in the world of commodities. This is what Marx terms *fetishism*: a social, i.e. supersensuous, property that attaches itself to the object as soon as it is produced and is, therefore, inseparable from the production process and, therefore, the thing itself. Fetishism establishes itself in both the consciousness of the producer and in reality. To the immediate sensuous perception of producers, “the social relations between their private labours appear as *what they are*, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between people, but rather as material [*dinglich*] between persons and social relations between things.”¹³⁷

The commodity materially reflects men’s labour and the relationship between that labour and the total labour of society. A social relationship between human beings is hidden, concealed beneath a “material shell”.¹³⁸ In its finite material form the commodity reflects—*materially*—what is, in fact, a supersensuous social relationship. The immediate appearance of the commodity is socially mediated. The commodity’s social mediation is, however, concealed in the second immediacy of the commodity—as a thing possessing *value*. Value is a social quality that imposes itself on the material form of the commodity and, in so doing, confronts consciousness as a natural property of the object rather than as a reflection of the social nature of the thing qua commodity.

The danger of beginning from mere appearance should be clear: value—the social essence that is reified in the commodity form—is not immediately transparent to the senses. This takes us back to the so-called scientific standpoint of political economy. Their reflection proceeds “*post festum*” or after the fact. This form of analysis begins from the world as it is, as an ideal totality completely disregarding any account of the origin of this

¹³⁶ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 163-4. [My emphasis]

¹³⁷ Ibid., 166.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 167. “[W]hen Galiani said: Value is a relation between persons... he ought to have added: a relation concealed beneath a material shell.”

totality. It derives its categories from the existing reality and, in doing so, confirms the presuppositions that underlie it formally and ideally. Capitalism appears to emerge naturally and exist in a latent form in all sorts of primitive societies. For Marx, capitalism's invariant appearance is dispelled once other modes of production are examined concretely. In this light, Marx finds quite a different state of affairs in feudalism: "Personal dependence characterises the social relations of material production... [P]recisely because relations of personal dependence form the given social foundation, *there is no need for labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality.*"¹³⁹ The commodity, it is true, confronts the political economist as a something that must be deciphered or what Marx calls, interestingly, a "social hieroglyphic". However, the political economist remains satisfied with the apparently scientific discovery that the commodity is a product of labour. This fact, claims Marx, marks the specificity of the current mode of production, but it "by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity possesses by the social characteristics of labour."¹⁴⁰ Political economy fails to ask why value takes on this particular form. They take the current economic reality "to be just as ultimately valid as the fact that the scientific dissection of the air into its component parts left the atmosphere itself unaltered in its physical configuration."¹⁴¹

The scientific metaphor is useful here: Marx explicitly distinguishes between the physical sciences and the economic sciences. Marx makes use of another scientific example: "In the act of seeing... light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relationship between physical things."¹⁴² The commodity, however, is not compared to this scientific example, but to a religious one. The objectivity of the natural categories of the natural scientist is quite different from the economist's socially objective categories of the commodity-form and value. The commodity-form and the value-relation have nothing whatsoever to do with a relationship between physical things. This is true, but at the same time the supersensuous social objectivity gains a material force in the form of the commodity. Therefore, value appears as an objective property of things that is continually reinforced in everyday experience. The objectivity of value and scientific objectivity might very well be different, but in reality and in experience social objectivity asserts itself as a natural law "[i]n the same way the law of

¹³⁹ Ibid., 170.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 167.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 165. [My emphasis]

gravity asserts itself when a person's house collapses on top of him."¹⁴³ For Marx, the social objectivity of value is not something false or deceptive. The objectivity of value is as real and as necessary as the law of gravity, a fact that is proven again and again in the experience of the individual that lives under the capitalist mode of production and exchange.

Because of its perceived necessity, the essence of value becomes concealed from the point of view of experience. Marx is clear that political economy does not simply make an error, but that their convictions "emerge from experience itself."¹⁴⁴ Through the commodity-form, the social objectivity of value gains a material force. This is a quite disturbing conception; the objectivity of the commodity becomes projected outside of the social practices of human beings. Rather than providing an analysis of this genesis of this phenomenon, political economy begins from this form as given: "[t]he forms which stamp products as commodities and which are therefore the preliminary requirements for circulation of commodities already possess the fixed quality of forms of social life."¹⁴⁵ The supersensuous spectral objectivity of commodities flows from the experience of a society oriented around exchange and the individuals engaged in this relationship. In light of this, political economy merely provides a theoretical justification for this metaphysical conception of value. Their apparently eternal and immutable categories are projected outside of human beings and take on the appearance of a natural law.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, here we find echoes of Marx's critique of Lange. Rather than examining the real development of the current mode of production, "reflection on the forms of human life, hence also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposed to their real development."¹⁴⁶ From the point of view of the present, the current reality and the categories that form its totality appear quite certain. But, this certainty can only be grasped in hindsight. Marx's point here is quite important; he is stating that the process of development or origin must not be lost in the result. This is one essential theme of Marx's method. While we may only be able to grasp our current reality as a conceptual totality, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that this totality is a product of previous human history. In this critique of political economy, echoes of Marx's critique of

¹⁴³ Ibid., 168.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Feuerbach can also be detected; the economists take the existing reality and reproduce it ideally in the form of a scientific theory. However, Marx's critique of political economy differs from his criticisms of Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians on an important point: this ideal reproduction of reality is not the result of ideology, but possesses a material foundation. Here, Marx breaks down the strict distinction between theoretical abstraction and empirical reality found in the *German Ideology*. In the place of this distinction is a conception of human practice that is tied up in the value abstraction and fetishism. Accordingly, reality is not separable into its fetishistic forms of appearance and social essence. Rather, as Bonefeld suggests, "human relations subsist in and through these forms. They do so in a contradictory way."¹⁴⁷ What is necessary, therefore, is an examination of reality itself as a result of this form of practice.

Such an examination can be done, at least in part, through a critique of political economy as an ideal representation of this inverted world, something that leads Marx to characterise the categories of economics as deranged [*verrückte*]. Backhaus stresses the double-nature of the German *verrückte* meaning both mad or crazy and also displaced in the spatial sense of being dislocated.¹⁴⁸ The categories of economics are deranged in this double-sense. Thus, the categories of economics are deranged not because the economist is a madman or necessarily wrong, but because of certain methodological presupposition. As Marx claims, classical economics starts from the finished form of the world of commodities—"the money form"—that conceals the relations between people by making them appear as relations between things. In beginning with a deranged form economic theories necessarily reflect this state of derangement. Rather than revealing this fact, economics proceeds from the finished form as it is given. It is in this sense, then, that we can talk about economics as an ideal representation of the real state of derangement of capitalist society. This is the world that Marx describes as an "enchanted, deranged, topsy-turvy world" in the Trinity Formula.¹⁴⁹ The state of derangement is not a mistake of consciousness, but a real state that finds its objectivity confirmed in the process of exchange and materiality in the form of the commodity and money. It is, in other words, a state of derangement that is confirmed and perpetuated in the everyday experiences and

¹⁴⁷ Werner Bonefeld, "Human Practice and Perversion", *Common Sense* no. 15 (1994), 50.

¹⁴⁸ Backhaus, "Between Philosophy and Science" in Werner Bonefeld and Richard Gunn (ed.), *Open Marxism Volume 1: Dialectics and History*. (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 62.

¹⁴⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 3* trans. David Fernbach. (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 969. [Translation modified]

practices of individuals engaged in exchange. The nature of this state of derangement is revealed in the money-form, to which I now turn.

2.7 Fetishism and the Money-Form

The capitalist form of money, i.e. the concept of money, emerges as the result of historical and social processes. These processes conceal the conceptual origin of the capitalist money-form in its finished form as a material thing. The supersensuous social character of money is hidden beneath its dazzling sensuous appearance as gold or silver. Marx describes this as the “magic of money”: that the physical object appears to emerge from the ground as money, i.e. as the direct incarnation of all human labour.¹⁵⁰ As I discussed above, the money-form develops when the universal equivalent form becomes identified with the natural form of a particular commodity. To experience, however, the opposite seems to occur: not that a particular commodity becomes money because all other commodities relate to it and express value in it, but that all commodities express their values in money because it is money. The result of this is that the social mediation of this process is lost in the result and “[w]ithout any initiative on their part the commodities find their own value-configuration ready to hand, in the form of a physical commodity existing outside but also alongside them.”¹⁵¹

The ideal totality of capitalist social relations finds its material incarnation in money, a form, which Marx stresses, is not merely a sign of value.¹⁵² The social property—value—coincides immediately with the natural body of the money commodity—its use-value. It is in this light, that money becomes a truly sensuous supersensuous thing. In money the usual theoretical distinctions between value and use-value or sensuous and supersensible no longer seem to apply. Money is the concrete embodiment of the essential contradiction between these two poles. Money is an ideal or conceptual totality that gains a foothold in reality through the concrete sensuous practices of individuals. Because of its necessary appearance, however, its social essence becomes completely indistinguishable from its

¹⁵⁰ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 187.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² See Ibid., 185 and 185f11. Fowkes consistently mistranslates the German *Zeichen* as symbol throughout *Capital*. He goes so far as to change the French *Signe* into symbol in Marx’s quotation of Montesquieu: “Money is a symbol [*Signe*] of a thing and represents it”. I have developed a lengthier examination of the symbolic character of money that draws on Hegel, Marx and Walter Benjamin. This will be the subject of further research.

immediate objective appearance as a physical thing. At the most basic level, this is why any economic analysis that begins with money is bound to fail even though it correctly recognises that money is the ultimate expression of value. In order to reveal the social essence of money it is necessary to provide a genetic account of its origin in the process of exchange. Marx marks an important distinction when he treats money as a commodity rather than simply treating money as money.

In concealing its social nature, money confronts human beings as something quasi-natural. As Marx states, “[a]nyone can use money as money without necessarily understanding what it is.”¹⁵³ Marx is acutely aware that this is not a natural process, but that it is a result of a very specific set of social practices. Yet, at the same time, because money conceals its social nature it appears in everyday experience as something necessary. This objectivity is enforced by the brute fact that in capitalist society men require money in order to sustain their natural existence. So, it is not only that human beings can use money without understanding what it is, but that its objectivity cannot be dispelled by simply revealing its mysteries. It is as the substance of money (although a merely social substance rather than a material substance) that value is able to establish itself objectively in the everyday life and consciousness of individuals. It arises because of the social relations of exchange and persists in the social practices of individuals. Money, the finished form of value comes to act as the retroactive grounds and justification for the invariant appearance of capitalist social relations.

It is possible to speak of money as something contingent because it exists in and through the social practices of individuals, but, at the same time, its objectivity is not an illusion that can simply be dispelled at the level of consciousness. Money is the necessary form of appearance of value and, as such, cannot simply be done away with so long as social relations take on a reified form. The overcoming of the reification of social relations in money requires a two-fold process: first, Marx must reveal the social essence that appears in an inverted form as a relationship between things; and, second, demonstrate how human practice constitutes and perpetuates the current reality. It is only by understanding the latter that we can talk about overcoming the inversion. Marx’s position here is quite different from someone like Lange, for example, who posits his standpoint of the ideal outside of reality.

¹⁵³ Quoted from Heinrich, *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Capital*: 42.

It is here that I find the limit of both the empirical materialism and abstract idealism. To dispense of the crude materialist seems quite simple: in remaining at the level of mere appearance they cannot help but see value as a natural property of the money commodity. As Marx claims, this property is a supersensuous, i.e. social, property that coincides with the natural use-value of a particular commodity. At the level of everyday experience and immediate perception, the contradictory unity of opposites appears as something natural. The social character of money is concealed in its material shape. As Marx states, however, the appearance of unity is a “false semblance” that is only established when money is not considered as a commodity. Once the nature of money as a commodity is revealed (and this can be done by working back through the forms of equivalence) we realise that the value is a social rather than a quasi-natural property of things. Money as money makes very little sense from the empirical point of view of the materialist since if its substance is value then that substance must be social. It is, in other words, a social thing that appears in a material form rather than a material thing that comes out of the ground as money. Thus, contrary to appearance, the money-form is not something transparent to our immediate perception, but something that can only be understood as a result of a historical and social process. It is something that appears immediately sensuous, but is, in fact, a contradictory totality of an objective material appearance and an essential social subjectivity.

In contrast to the materialist, the idealist appears to provide a much more sophisticated account of money and value. The mistaken understanding of money as something natural can be grasped in Hegel’s conception of the money-sign:

The value of a thing may be very heterogeneous; it depends on need. If you want to express the value of a thing not in its specificity but in the abstract, then it is money which expresses this. Money represents any and every thing, though does it does not portray the need itself but is only a *sign* [*Zeichen*] of it, it is itself controlled by the specific value [of the commodity]. Money, as something abstract, merely expresses this value.¹⁵⁴

Here, Hegel recognises that value rather than money is the universal. Of course, Hegel begins from a conception of value as need, something, as I have said, that Marx convincingly disputes. However, despite this limit, Hegel offers a conception of money as something that through its finite sensuous particularity expresses the universal value. For Marx, Hegel’s conception of money successfully removes “the appearance [*Schein*] of strangeness from the mysterious shapes assumed by human relations whose origins they

¹⁵⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox and Stephen Houlgate. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 75.

were unable to decipher.”¹⁵⁵ From the perspective that understands money as a sign, it appears as the arbitrary product of human reflection. Value and money exist side-by-side: money—the universal—finds its expression in the natural form of gold, silver, paper bills, etc. Hegel, quite rightly, recognises that the form of representation is completely arbitrary. Money as a sign, therefore, takes on an appearance other than its natural form: “A bill of exchange does not represent what it really is—paper; it is only the sign of another universal—value.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, Hegel appears to understand that money is “the form of appearance of human relations hidden behind it”¹⁵⁷ even though he remains tied to a traditional labour theory of value.

The limit of the idealist view, however, is that it does not recognise the genuinely occult quality of money. For Marx, Hegel represents the ultimate expression of the Enlightenment conception of money as an abstract and arbitrary sign. However, Hegel points to the fact that the value of money is something illusory. The apparent contingency of the money-sign is undermined by Marx’s conception of money as a sensuous supersensuous thing. The empiricist and the idealist remain one-sided: one is able to grasp money’s appearance and the other its essence. The empiricist gets things right at the level of appearance: “The physical object, gold or silver in its crude state, becomes, immediately on its emergence from the bowels of the earth, the direct incarnation of human labour.”¹⁵⁸ Similarly, the idealist points towards its social essence without grasping the necessity of its particular form of appearance. Therefore, neither the empiricist nor idealist view of money can explain the central riddle it poses for Marx: “why and by what means a commodity becomes money.”¹⁵⁹ For Marx, in order to reveal these conditions, it is necessary to examine the form of value described above.

The social relationship between things finds its necessary form of appearance in the finished form of money. In money all the contradictions and abstractions of capitalist social reality are held together in an ideal totality, albeit one that is expressed in a concrete material form. Given the fact that a supersensuous social relationship takes on a material form, the second social nature of capitalism comes to confront human beings as a form of objective nature. It is with this that we find limit of both the objective validity of

¹⁵⁵ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 186.

¹⁵⁶ Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*: 75.

¹⁵⁷ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*: 185.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 187.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 186.

experience and the critique of consciousness and, with this, the limit of both traditional materialist and idealist epistemologies for the critical analysis of capitalist social reality.

The aim of this chapter was to examine Marx's materialism in its various guises. What has become clear through my examination is that a theoretically consistent reconstruction of Marx's materialism is a difficult if not impossible task. What is more interesting is how Marx's materialism takes on a variety of different forms throughout his oeuvre. While he offers little in the way of sustained theoretical reflections on method, I have tried to demonstrate the ways Marx's theoretical position develops in interesting and novel ways throughout his writings. Specifically, I have demonstrated how he moves from a form of idealism, influenced by Hegel and Feuerbach, to a more empirically oriented position in his middle-period. Through my examination of *Capital*, I have demonstrated how Marx reconciles his idealist and empiricist tendencies come to be reconciled in his more mature thought. His critique of political economy helped bring to light the limit of his empiricism. At the same time, Marx is well aware of the limits of idealism. These limits are not, however, not merely theoretical considerations. What is of utmost importance is the discovery of a method adequate to the reality Marx both seeks to criticise and, ultimately, overcome.

What is characteristic of Marx's materialism is a fundamental tension between two moments that Marx himself identifies and that I identified in the previous chapter on materialism. Put simply, we could call these the Democritean and Epicurean moments. The Democritean moment is characterised by its ultimate scepticism in regards to the reality of the world as it appears. Democritean materialism ultimately rests on the idealist assumption that the world of appearance is conventional, i.e. a form of subjective appearance. On the other hand, the Epicurean moment rejects that scepticism, it views the world of appearance as essential. Banaji correctly recognises that Democritus and Epicurus occupy the position of Kant and Hegel in Marx's doctoral thesis. However, I disagree with Banaji's claim that Marx's adopts the Epicurean/Hegelian position as his own.¹⁶⁰ It would be an error to separate essence and appearance in the way that Marx himself does in the *EPM*. At the same time, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that Marx remains fundamentally sceptical about the objectivity and validity of capitalist reality. Marx accepts that the capitalist reality is the only reality while also asserting that its appearance is perverted,

¹⁶⁰ Banaji, "From the Commodity to *Capital*": 22.

displaced and fundamentally false. This mirrors the tension found in Democritus' materialism in the first chapter: the belief that the reality contains a real material substrate while remaining sceptical in regards to reality as it appears. When Marx speaks of social objectivity or social validity, he acknowledges the objectivity of appearances while, at the same time, noting that we cannot simply end there, at the level of appearance. Rather, we must penetrate appearances, estrange ourselves from the conventional, and show the fundamentally inhuman nature of capitalist reality. The metaphysical materialist who insists that human beings exist in a mechanistic realm of necessity hits on a fundamental truth. However, the realm of necessity or domination under which people live is not a product of eternal nature, but of the social practices human beings—it is the social reality of capitalism. So long as the law of value remains in force in reality, true spontaneity and true freedom only appear in reality in a limited and finite way, as promises of a potential that remains unrealised.

While Marx accounts for the empirical origin of concepts such as the commodity, money and, most importantly, value, he also acknowledges the structuring role they play in the everyday life of the capitalist subject. In other words, even a materialist account of concept formation must acknowledge the fundamentally metaphysical status of concepts. These concepts are not simply by-products of experience, but develop through the interaction of complex social processes and come to govern social relations between human beings. Marx points to this fact quite clearly, but does not develop an account of concept formation in any great detail. It has been left to the generations of Marxist that have followed to fill in an account of Marx's methodology. I am going to side-step this debate by examining what I think is a complimentary, but by no means identical account, of concept formation in the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin develops a mode of critique and account of concept formation that, I claim, is materialist in its orientation. Fundamentally, however, this is a form of materialism that is irreducible to either a form of material empiricism or abstract idealism.

I will now move on to an examination of Benjamin's early thought, specifically his engagement with neo-Kantianism. Both Marx and Benjamin develop their materialist form of criticism through a lengthy engagement with idealist philosophy. Thus, both, rather than positing a strict break with idealism, attempt to encompass a form of idealism within their materially oriented philosophies. I reflect on these points a little more in the conclusion but it is clear that Benjamin comes to criticise the neo-Kantians on similar grounds to Marx's

criticism of Hegel and political economy. The idealisation of their object and a one-sided abstraction of method from the object of criticism are considered problematic by both Benjamin and Marx. This is not altogether surprising since both political economy and academic neo-Kantianism sought to ground their theoretical positions on the basis of a positivistic conception of science.

3. Walter Benjamin's Critique of neo-Kantianism

In this chapter I examine the concepts of knowledge and experience that Walter Benjamin develops in his early writings in relation to Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy. As I show, Benjamin initially develops his own conception of knowledge and experience against the background of neo-Kantianism. Benjamin's attempt to develop a 'higher concept of experience' in the essay on "Program of the Coming Philosophy" results in a rejection of what he considers the essentially limited and scientistic conception of knowledge experience characteristic of neo-Kantians such as Hermann Cohen and Heinrich Rickert. However, despite his critical engagement with neo-Kantianism, Benjamin's own epistemological position is explicitly developed from within the tradition of post-Kantian critical philosophy. It is, therefore, not simply developed through a rejection of Kantian or neo-Kantian philosophy, but must be understood in relation to both. The aim of this chapter is to examine Benjamin's critical engagement with both Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy. In light of this aim, it is necessary to mark a distinction between Kant's critical philosophy and the form of Kantianism that is developed by neo-Kantianism. Further, this will require understanding the internal distinction within the two main branches of neo-Kantianism: the Marburg and South-Western or Baden school.

Both of these schools of neo-Kantianism present a significant modification of Kant's critical philosophy¹, but also develop differing interpretations of Kant. Hermann Cohen's neo-Kantianism, for example, incorporates elements of Platonic and Leibnizian philosophy while developing a form of abstract scientific idealism founded on the method of pure mathematical science. Alongside Cohen's scientific idealism, I also examine the philosophy of Heinrich Rickert who, while sharing a similar starting point with Cohen, develops his own epistemologically grounded and transcendental account of history as an attempt to counter what he saw as the dominance of a scientific worldview. By examining these two sides of neo-Kantianism, I am able to place Benjamin's own reflections on Kant, epistemology and method within the context of the dominant academic philosophy of his

¹ See Beiser, "Review of *Nineteenth Century Philosophy: Revolutionary Responses to the Existing Order*". Beiser is correct to note that one of the reasons neo-Kantianism is so critically under-examined in the English scholarship is the incorrect assumption that they are strict disciples of Kant. As I will show, Cohen breaks with Kant in a significant way. Further, both Cohen and Rickert emphasizes a very specific reading of Kant—one oriented around the concerns Kant raises in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* and the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Thus, neo-Kantianism emphasizes a scientific reading of Kant against the subjectivism they saw as characteristic of the Romantic and Hegelian traditions of post-Kantian idealism.

day. Further, the conflict between Cohen's genetic logical idealism and Rickert's transcendental empiricism opens up two conflicting interpretations of Kantian philosophy in regards to the relationship between ideal concepts and empirical reality. As I will claim, Benjamin develops a position at which this conflict can be overcome without one side—the empirical or the conceptual—becoming subordinate to the other.

Benjamin's early critical engagement with neo-Kantianism culminated in a reading group he held with Gershom Scholem on Cohen's text *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*. As young students both Scholem and Benjamin attended courses and lectures taught by Cohen in Berlin. However, despite initial enthusiasm for both Cohen's text and his philosophical system in general both men were ultimately dissatisfied with what they found, so much so that they broke off the reading group before finishing the text. According to Scholem, Benjamin described the book as "a philosophical vespiary" containing highly questionable deductions and interpretations.²

In addition to attending Cohen's lectures, Benjamin was also a student of Heinrich Rickert. In a 1940 letter to Theodor Adorno, Benjamin writes, "I am myself a pupil of Rickert (as you are a pupil of Cornelius)."³ While this could be interpreted as an endorsement, Rickert certainly does not escape scorn. In a 1918 letter to Scholem, Benjamin writes that while he is not familiar with Rickert's 'big book'—*The Limits of Concept formation in natural science*—he is familiar with Rickert's method, which he describes as "modern in the worst possible sense of the word, so to speak: modern *à tout prix*."⁴

Despite his critical comments in regards to both Cohen and Rickert, it remains important to distinguish their respective position in order to grasp the specific problematic that emanates out of these two schools of neo-Kantianism for Benjamin. In light of this, I begin with the acknowledgement of a shared epistemological starting-point in neo-Kantianism, but also demonstrate the differences between the two schools, specifically in regards to Cohen and Rickert's differing conceptions of reality, history and natural science. Second, in light my examination of neo-Kantianism, I will look at Benjamin's early writings

² Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: NYRB Classics, 2012), 74. See also, Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 173. In a 1921 letter to Scholem, Benjamin describes his engagement with Cohen's *Ethik des reinen Willens*: "what I read there depressed me. Cohen's sense of the truth was clearly so strong that he was required to make the most unbelievable leaps in order for him to turn his back on it."

³ Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*: 111.

⁴ Ibid., 116.

on Kant and neo-Kantianism, in particular the fragment “On Perception” and the essay “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”. My central focus will be on Benjamin’s understanding and criticism of both the Kantian and neo-Kantian concepts of experience. In particular, I will look at his attempt to provide a revised “higher concept of experience” that goes beyond the mechanistic form of experience that he claims Kant adopts uncritically from the Enlightenment.

My aim in this chapter is not to place Benjamin’s thought within either the Kantian or neo-Kantian tradition, but to demonstrate what he perceives as the limits of both traditions. This will allow a more philosophically grounded discussion of his later movement away from neo-Kantianism towards a critical evaluation of German Romanticism. In contrast to the neo-Kantian emphasis on pure mathematical science, apodictic certainty and objective validity, Romanticism, in its more empirically and materially oriented approach, provides an alternative to neo-Kantian epistemology from within the post-Kantian philosophical tradition.

3.1 Hermann Cohen’s Scientific Idealism

Hermann Cohen began his career at Marburg as Lange’s protégé. Like Lange, Cohen sought to secure a form of idealism from the encroachments of philosophical materialism and the dominance of natural science. Despite a certain level of agreement with Lange, Cohen breaks with the previous generation of neo-Kantians in several significant ways. Chief among these, as Herbert Schnädelbach writes, was the substitution of a “strictly logical conception of the Kantian program for the physiological interpretation” that was present in both Helmholtz and Lange’s form of neo-Kantianism.⁵ Further, Cohen also breaks with what he refers to as the subjectivism of Lange’s idealism. Cohen re-examined Lange’s philosophy in order to demonstrate that his distinction between materialism and idealism was superficial. In renouncing idealism’s claim to knowledge of reality, Lange is forced to accept an empiricist theory of knowledge: knowledge must be restricted to what can be verified in experience. By reading Kant’s deduction of the categories psychophysically, Lange believed that he could legitimately claim to have overcome the gap between the transcendental and empirical in Kant’s thought.

⁵ Herbert Schnädelbach, *German Philosophy: 1831-1933*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1984), 105.

For Cohen, this led to an inability on Lange's part to locate his practical philosophy within the theoretical. This not only raises a problem for practical philosophy, but for theoretical philosophy as well. Lange, Cohen claims, treats the Idea as "an inner emotional concept" rather than as an "epistemological emblem".⁶ As a result of his naturalisation of the idea and abandonment of ethics, Lange fundamentally misunderstood the nature of idealism. Cohen, in contrast, does not wish to abandon ethics to a transcendent realm of ideas seen as a historically specific product of man's natural disposition. Rather, he wishes to assign ethics a status that raises it to the same level of dignity as the concepts of logic or mathematics. In doing so, he goes further than Lange in conceiving of the ethical Idea as something that totally exceeds experience yet, at the same time, forms its fundamental basis. In Cohen's words: "If all reality of experience, if all sensible existence were destroyed, its boundaries in the noumenon would have to remain. If all nature were to perish, the Idea of freedom would remain. If all experience should cease, ethical reality would remain."⁷ Against Lange's subjective ideal, Cohen understands the ethical idea as a *hypothesis* that underlies empirical reality in pure thought.⁸

It is possible to say, therefore, that Cohen accepts the critique of materialism put forward by Helmholtz and Lange, which claims that materialism "fixes [reality] in something for which the senses cannot offer a sufficient guarantee."⁹ However, Cohen extends this critique to idealism itself so long as it does not ground its principles objectively. In light of this, Cohen rejected all subjectivist readings of Kant. These readings include the *physiological* reading put forward by Helmholtz and Lange along with the *psychological* reading. For Cohen, the psychological reading systematically deduces the objective content of knowledge from consciousness, a reading he attributes to Fichte.¹⁰ For Cohen, both materialism and idealism slip into a form of metaphysical dogmatism if they make the claim to deduce reality from a groundless absolute in either the subject's natural psychology or from concepts deduced from representations of a pre-existing empirical world. Cohen aimed to demonstrate that the form of scientific materialism that Lange

⁶ Quoted from Köhnke, *The rise of neo-Kantianism*: 190-1.

⁷ Quoted Ibid., 194.

⁸ This notion of idea of hypothesis is central to Cohen's philosophy. For Cohen, the ethical idea can be conceived as autonomous and objective only insofar as it is grounded *a priori* in the structures of pure logical thought.

⁹ Quoted from Ibid., 191.

¹⁰ Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 49.

adhered to at the level of his theoretical philosophy was, at its core, a form of idealism.¹¹ For Cohen, “idealism... in its classic forms, in Plato, in Descartes, in Kant, is a method not a doctrine, and its products, positive and negative, are the outcome of *epistemological critique*.”¹²

Unlike Lange, Cohen does not want to concede the ground of theoretical philosophy to materialism and natural science. It is here that we find the essence of Cohen’s philosophy and its relation to Kant’s critical project. For Cohen, what is fundamental to all forms of idealism from Plato to Kant is a transcendental method.¹³ Against Lange’s *History*, where the conflict between philosophical materialism and idealism is perceived of as foundational for philosophy, Cohen emphasises the continuity between philosophical idealism and the development of natural science. In the development of the idealist tradition, from Plato through Leibniz to Kant, Cohen sees a fundamental relationship between the developments of science and philosophical idealism.

In Cohen’s critical philosophy, we get a slightly different story than Lange’s *History*: it is not the so-called materialism of Democritean atomism that lies at the foundation of the exact sciences, but what he terms *critical idealism*. For Cohen this history of idealism begins with Plato who recognised the representational role of sensation.¹⁴ In conceptualising the starting point of philosophical reflection at this point, Cohen is able to reassert the primacy of pure thought as the basis for rational inquiry into the nature of reality. In other words, it is only when we move away from our immediate sense experience—away from mere representation—that true inquiry into reality begins. While Cohen admits that philosophy, like all other forms of knowledge, must begin from experience, its special role is to inquire into the very conditions of the possibility of experience, something that fundamentally exceeds empirical experience itself.¹⁵

For Cohen, pure thought or reason cannot merely be a product of sensation. In turn, reality cannot be reduced to what can be sensibly intuited. As Cohen states in the *Religion of*

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² Quoted from Köhnke, *The rise of neo-Kantianism*: 191. [My emphasis]

¹³ Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*: 18.

¹⁴ Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des Reinen Willens*. (B. Cassirer: Berlin, 1921), 113. As Cohen writes, “In his critique of knowledge Plato’s task was to bring about such a drastic separation as to put the thought of knowledge on one side, while he put *representation* on the side of sensation. One ought to believe that representation also partakes of thought, or rather thought of representation. But Plato makes a clear divide and, to all intents and purposes, assigns representation to sensation.”

¹⁵ Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*: 18.

Reason: “The *senses* are in direct opposition to reason; basically they are common to animals and men.”¹⁶ For Cohen, the poverty of the senses as the source of philosophical reflection is revealed in Leibniz’ conception of the infinitesimal. For Leibniz, infinity is derived from continuity. This has important implications for Cohen that extend beyond mathematics to philosophy in general: “For the *being* of infinity is now grounded in the *thought* of continuity. Continuity, as much as it is *idea*, and inasmuch as it is *law*, is now a principle of both *reason* and of *nature*.”¹⁷ The concept of the infinitesimal is a pure concept of thought rather than a product of sensibility despite the fact that it is valid as a “productive principle of extended reality”.¹⁸ The ground of extension, therefore, is not within extension itself since it is merely comparative. Rather, a nonextensive ground must be located, which for Leibniz, according to Cohen, is both positive and intensive—the infinitesimal. The ground of extension cannot be perceived sensibly. Cohen’s conclusion: “Thought from now onwards can no longer be *equal to evidence*, to *sensible intuitibility*.”¹⁹

Reality cannot be deduced empirically from sense experience if concepts that are productively valid in reality exceed that experience.²⁰ Any form of materialism that claims to deduce reality from the pre-existence of matter begins from an abstraction. If matter, as a first principle, is an abstraction then all materialism is, in fact, a form of speculative idealism. In contrast to speculative idealism, Cohen’s critical idealism, as a method of foundation, can provide the transcendental grounding for its first principle “in pure thought and thus become a valid concept for science.”²¹ With this claim, Cohen provides a fairly convincing refutation method of scientific materialism without refuting scientific inquiry into empirical reality.

Against Lange’s subjective Idea, Cohen offers a Platonic-Kantian conception of the Idea that lays the foundation for a transcendental concept of objectivity. In doing so, Cohen is able to grant the idea a form of objectivity that is usually restricted to the concepts of logic or mathematics. In making this move, he rejects Lange’s ethical and theoretical naturalism that views the Idea in terms of a natural disposition. As

¹⁶ Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

¹⁷ Quoted from Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*: 36.

¹⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁹ Quoted from Ibid., 40. [My emphasis]

²⁰ See Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*: 60. For Cohen, Kant achieves a similar result by depriving the category of substance of its status as absolutely independent. Accordingly, substance is seen as absolute only insofar as it is the precondition for causality.

²¹ Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*: 59.

Schnädelbach writes, “[n]eo-Kantianism in all its many varieties... rehabilitated philosophy as a whole in the form of a theory of knowledge by attributing to this discipline the function of a basis for philosophy and science.”²² Against Lange’s poetic “standpoint of the ideal”, Cohen, in his logical and systematic approach, places his emphasis on critical idealism’s role in providing an epistemological foundation not only for ethics but also for all domains of inquiry into the nature of reality. Central to this project is a conception of the idea as *hypothesis*. Cohen places his conception of pure thought—thought that produces content by itself—against notions of representational thinking. According to Cohen’s reading of Kant, the factual validity of mathematical principles is presupposed and these principles can be described as pure because they are self-evident and underivable from empirical experience.²³ For Cohen, mathematics is a model for pure thought insofar as it is nonrepresentational; real knowledge is pure thought free from sensuous representation. Ideas as hypothesis both precede and ground being. As hypotheses, ideas provide the objective grounding for forms of representational thinking which follow.

The result of this conception of the relationship between conceptual science and reality is, for Cohen, the re-establishment of the link between both theoretical and practical philosophy, on one hand, and speculative philosophical thought and scientific inquiry into the empirical world, on the other. In doing so, he overcomes the central dualism between the subjective ideas and objective science that characterised Lange’s idealism. Cohen is able to grant to both theoretical and practical philosophy the objective validity that is fundamentally lacking in Lange’s account.

By rejecting the subjectivist reading of Kant, Cohen subtly shifts the ground of Kant’s critique. In order to become scientifically valid, experience comes to be identified with scientific cognition. For Cohen, philosophy does not take science’s place, but as a form of critique it takes, as Poma points out, “the fact of science as its starting point and justifies [science’s] possibility.”²⁴ For Cohen, it is the “fact” of mathematical natural science that marks Kant’s philosophy as exemplary. The aim of critical idealism differs from science in that it is the transcendental investigation into the possibility of nature as an object of scientific inquiry as such. Cohen is able to assert that the progress of critical

²² Schnädelbach, *German Philosophy: 1831-1933*: 106.

²³ For a discussion of this issue see Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*: 11. See also, Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*: 36. For Poma, Cohen’s emphasis on the underivable nature of ideas reveals that Cohen’s idealism is more indebted to a Platonic theory of ideas than a Kantian notion of a priori synthesis.

²⁴ Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*: 49.

philosophy plays a foundational role in providing the fundamental principles that underlie natural science. Cohen, therefore, follows Lange's privileging of thought over reality: "pure thought as the method for the foundation of reality."²⁵ As such, critical philosophy is best placed to investigate the grounds of science's claim to knowledge of reality. This is the meaning of the neo-Kantian program of *epistemological critique*: that philosophy provides a critical theory of knowledge that is able to reflect on both its own and science's methodological presuppositions.

In establishing the foundational role of critical idealism for science, Cohen goes beyond both Helmholtz and Lange's dualism of the idea and reality and demonstrates the role idealist philosophy plays in the objective grounding of the natural sciences. With this, Cohen is able to rescue idealism what he saw as the subjectivism of both the Fichtean and Romantic tradition of post-Kantian idealism and the physiological reading of Kant that characterised Cohen's neo-Kantian predecessors.

One of the chief criticisms levelled against Cohen's critical idealism is that it is an idealism without a subject. Critical idealism, in other words, resolves the problems of all previous forms of idealism by becoming a form of scientism and methodology. This was the charge made by Siegfried Marck, who claimed that neo-Kantianism radicalised idealism when it resolved the problems of the thing-in-itself and the 'subject in general' within the ideal itself: "the real is *weakened in the ideal*, i.e. it is eliminated."²⁶ For Marck, Cohen accepted the correlation of thought and being with the former being subsumed under the latter. The content is always conceived of as a product of the form and the positing of a content of experience that does not refer back to an empirical subject, but to a form of pure thought that exceeds the subject's experience of the empirical world. As a result, the chief concern of Cohen's form of critical idealism is not the empirical subject and its experience, but the grounding of an objectively valid form of knowledge that is independent of the subject.

Cohen did not really dispute the criticism levelled against him by Marck and others because the notion of a pure logical idealism is the foundation of his philosophy system. As he states:

²⁵ Ibid., 58.

²⁶ Quoted from Ibid., 62.

Critical idealism is not an idealism of the subject, but of idea; it owes its name not to Locke's 'idea' in its meaning as representation, but to Plato's Idea, in its interpretation as hypothesis, law, principle of validity. This law—and not the spirit—is the absolute in which all knowledge is grounded. It is the 'subject' of all knowledge, which confers objectivity on the latter.²⁷

For Cohen, any theory of the subject must wrestle with the fact that an empirical or psychological subject is not the subject of valid knowledge, but of error. The objectivity and validity of knowledge must be posited at the level of a transcendental logic that exceeds the empirical psychological subject. Thus, Cohen makes a distinction between an empirical subject who is the subject of error, and the form of transcendental logic that exceeds the both the empirical subject and reality itself. And, as we saw in the first chapter, the notion that the empirical subject is a subject prone to error is one of the epistemological tenets of neo-Kantianism going back to Helmholtz' critique of scientific materialism.

Critical idealism asserts a logical-transcendental subject that acts as the normative principle and grounds for a form of judgement that is free from error. With this, Cohen is able to overcome the distinction between materialism and idealism that Lange could only achieve by assigning materialism and idealism to their respective theoretical corners. Against Lange's dualism, Cohen is able to reconcile the empirical reality of materialism and the speculative idea immanently in pure thought. Materialism's absolute—whether it is matter, the atom, or nature—only gains its objective reality as a product of pure thought. The application of a concept of pure thought to empirical reality and the objective knowledge that application provides can only be justified critically in reference to the concept's *origin*. It is this notion of origin that is central to Cohen's critical idealism. Through his concept of origin, Cohen is able to posit a transcendental unity of consciousness that exists in pure thought prior to any distinction between subject and object. For Cohen, there is a logical origin [*Ursprung*] prior to any form of judgement based on the distinction between thought and being.²⁸ As Gillian Rose describes it, Cohen's originary unity of pure logical thought does not operate through any form of synthesis, since a synthesis presupposes a split between thought and being or subject and object. Rather, pure logical thought is creative and producing thus bypassing the Kantian

²⁷ Quoted from Ibid.

²⁸ Rose, *Hegel contra sociology*: 11.

separation of the active faculty of the understanding and the passive faculty of sensible intuition.

How, then, does Cohen's critical idealism find itself in relation to Kant's critical philosophy? In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant distinguishes original or pure apperception from empirical apperception. For Kant, the 'I think' is an act of spontaneity that accompanies, but does not belong to sensibility as such.²⁹ As Howard Caygill states, "The 'I think' is a 'rational origin' or an effect which accompanies all experience, but one whose cause cannot be located in terms of experience."³⁰ For Cohen, the basis of his conception of pure thought and the foundation of his form of idealism is a conception of a spontaneous rational origin. However, as I indicated above, the concept of a rational origin is not conceived in relation to an experiencing subject, but to a mode of pure thought. Inherent in Cohen's conception of rational origin, therefore, is a rejection of the Kantian separation of the spontaneous faculty understanding and a receptive faculty of sensibility. Cohen remains within the Kantian problematic in relation to the limits of possible experience, in particular the limit of empirical or sense experience. However, Cohen separates his logic of origin from any form of philosophy that begins from a logic of being, something that Cohen claims characterised Romanticism.³¹ In Cohen's logic of origin, being or existence is subordinated to pure thought. Cohen claim is that the logic of origin is the foundation of modern science and, therefore, his scientific idealism. Origin is a principle for Cohen in two senses of the word: first, it is the supreme principle of pure knowledge from which every content originates and is grounded; second, pure thought as the thought of origin produces both the object of knowledge and grounds that object in thought.³²

²⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*: B132.

³⁰ Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1995), 311-2.

³¹ For example, in grounding his logic within ethics rather than the other way around, Cohen claims that Fichte commits an error typical of a logic of being. Crucially, for Cohen, ethics can only achieve an objective grounding if it recognises and is subordinated to the primacy of logic qua pure thought. As I demonstrated with Lange, once ethics gives up a logical method it forgoes the possibility of presenting itself as objective knowledge and, therefore, loses its claim to being an autonomous and objective form of knowledge. Lange accepted this as the condition of his subjective standpoint of the ideal. In contrast, for Cohen, a transcendental unity of ethics and logic can only occur from a philosophy that recognises the primacy of logic, i.e. from a philosophy that prioritises thought over being. Thus, from the point of view of content, ethics may appear to assert a primacy over logic. However, at the level of form logic always takes precedence since logic provides the transcendental grounding of the ethical idea as an autonomous and objective form of knowledge.

³² Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*: 92.

For Cohen, “[o]nly thought itself can produce what can count as being.”³³ In terms of the first point, the aim of knowledge is a process of verification by which it can verify objects of knowledge as products of pure thought.³⁴ In terms of the second, Cohen’s conception of pure thought requires that nothing is given to thought prior to its determinations. Or, in other words, productive pure thought must be able to situate its object of knowledge within itself prior to any a posteriori determinations. Thus, pure thought does not presuppose a given reality or object which presents itself to thought externally through the forms of sensible intuition. Cohen describes the judgements of pure thought as an adventurous detour [*abenteuerlichen Umweg*] by which the ‘something’ is tracked down to its origin *ab nihilo*—from nothing.³⁵ Reality is not conceived of as standing over and against pure thought as a pre-existing object of knowledge that must be conceptualised. As Poma states, “thought does not presuppose a given, while all content presupposes [thought] as origin.”³⁶ Therefore, for Cohen, there is no manifold of sensations given independently of the activity of thought. With this, Cohen can claim that reality—the object of science—is not truly distinct from thought. An unconceptualised manifold of sensation existing independently of the understanding is replaced with the logical progression of the method of mathematical sciences that are continually and progressively converging on their object—reality.³⁷

Cohen claims to build on the shared tradition of idealism and mathematical science that extends from Parmenides to Leibniz. Specifically, Cohen’s epistemological method is based on the methods of infinitesimal calculus.³⁸ This is the method by which the understanding, freed from the forms of sensible intuition, determines the real. Kant’s “Anticipations of Perception” demonstrates how appearance manifests itself in sensible intuition. There is, for Kant, a sense in which the object of appearance must have a

³³ Quoted from Ibid.

³⁴ See Reinier Wahl, “Identity and Correlation in Hermann Cohen’s System of Philosophy” in Reinier W. Munk (ed.), *Hermann Cohen’s Critical Idealism*, (Amsterdam: Springer, 2006), 85-6. Reinier Wiehl puts this quite nicely: “it is the movement of pure thought, which produces its thoughts from itself, to verify them as pure knowledge. The one and the other go together in this process of thought: the production of pure thought — not from pre-existing data, but from itself — and the verification of this thought as pure knowledge.”

³⁵ Cohen, *Ethik des Reinen Willens*: 69. “Das Urteil darf daher keinen abenteuerlichen Umweg scheuen, wenn es in seinem Ursprung das Etwas aufspüren will. Dieses Abenteuer des Denkens stellt das Nichts dar. Auf dem Umweg des Nichts stellt das Urteil den Ursprung des Etwas dar.”

³⁶ Andres Poma, *Yearning for Form and Other Essays on Hermann Cohen’s Thought*. (Amsterdam: Springer, 2006), 334.

³⁷ Michael Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*. (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 33.

³⁸ Michael Friedman, “Ernst Cassirer and the Philosophy of Science” in Gary Gutting (ed.), *Continental Philosophy of Science*. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2008), 3.

<<http://www3.nd.edu/~hps/Friedman=Cassirer.doc>>

substantial reality in order for it to appear as an object for determination by the understanding. For Cohen, in contrast, the givenness of the object is not an issue; the determination of reality is consigned solely to the spontaneous and productive understanding. Empirical reality, as an apparently independent object of knowledge standing over and against pure thought, is conceived as an incomplete object to which the epistemological method of the mathematical sciences is successively and continually applied.

The object of scientific knowledge, given to thought through the forms of sensible intuition, can be said to exist as a merely ‘not yet’ conceptualised point on which the methods of mathematical natural science are progressively converging. Cohen then, conceives of the forms of Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic as mere moments in the process of the progressive methodological development of the natural sciences. Thus, while Cohen acknowledges the importance of the forms of intuition for Kant, he is also, at the same time, able to undermine their centrality within the Kantian system. In other words, for Cohen, Kant quite correctly began from the highest point of scientific development available to him, but that moment has since been subordinated to further scientific progress.

For Cohen, the validity of the forms of intuition as principles of science must be acknowledged, but they were not Kant’s central contribution to philosophy. Rather, for Cohen, Kant’s significance is found in his general methodological starting point: the basic “fact” of pure mathematical science rather than the application of any particular scientific principles. For Cohen, the reality intuited through Kant’s forms is not something that exists over and against the concepts of natural science as a ‘thing’ to be deciphered. Rather, reality is only constituted as an object of knowledge through its subordination to pure metaempirical scientific concepts.

Through his subordination of existence or reality to pure thought, Cohen establishes the supremacy of his critical philosophy founded on the Kantian ‘fact’ of the pure mathematical sciences. Cohen extends Kant’s transcendental logic to the point at which it can contain the transcendental aesthetic. In turn, he is able to subordinate the forms of sensible intuition to the progressive logic of the natural sciences. Cohen’s critical idealism and its systematic logical theory of knowledge are derived from a specific notion of scientific thought. For Cohen, as Rose states, “[s]cientific thought is the unity of the creating and its creations and its activities of unifying and diversifying are a never-ending,

infinite task.”³⁹ Against Cohen’s extension of a transcendental logic, Rose charges him and neo-Kantianism in general with the debasement of empirical reality and the objectification of the object domains of the particular sciences. Cohen’s critical idealism, as Rose writes, “[i]nvestigates judgements in general, the genus character of judgement, and the different species of judgement.”⁴⁰ However, as I demonstrated above, the unity and continuity of different judgements is guaranteed a priori in pure thought by the *law of continuity*, something that is presupposed in Cohen’s scientific idealism in the form of the ‘fact’ of mathematical natural sciences. The principles of this form of thought are non-representational, mathematical and independent of empirical consciousness. In contrast to the ephemeral nature of sense-experience, Cohen claims that philosophy “requires the presupposition of the *eternal* as opposed to the transitoriness of the earthly institutions and human ideas.”⁴¹ In light of this, it can be said that Cohen subordinates being and existence to thought in order to safeguard the certainty and continuity of knowledge against the transitory nature of sensibility and experience. For Cohen, as Friedman states, “‘reality’ becomes incorporated within the realm of pure thought itself, and it is with good reason, then, that their epistemological conception becomes known as ‘logical idealism’.”⁴² Cohen conceives of being primarily as the being of thinking and this is what distinguishes his form of logical idealism from what he understood as the logic of being characteristic of subject-oriented forms of idealism.⁴³

For Benjamin, Cohen extends the pure scientific logic, based on the principles of the mathematical natural sciences, to all forms of knowledge both empirical and speculative. Cohen justifies his approach through a specific reading of Kant, as I discussed above. Cohen claims that Kant presupposed the factual validity of mathematical principles in general, i.e. that Kant’s great contribution was to begin from the presupposition of the ‘fact’ of pure mathematical science. Cohen’s claim to the self-evidence and factual validity of non-representational scientific thought is the foundation of Benjamin’s critique: for

³⁹ Rose, *Hegel contra sociology*: 11. See also, Friedman, “Ernst Cassirer and the Philosophy of Science” in *Continental Philosophy of Science*. As Friedman claims, for Cohen there is no independent manifold of sensations given to the subject that exists independently of the activity thought within spatio-temporal forms of human sensibility. Rather, “there is, instead, is an essentially dynamical or temporal procedure of active generation [*Erzeugung*], as the mind successively characterises or determines the ‘real’ that is to be the object of mathematical natural science in a continuous serial process.”

⁴⁰ Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*: 12.

⁴¹ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*: 83.

⁴² Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*: 31.

⁴³ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*: 11.

Benjamin neo-Kantianism posits a theory of knowledge that is unable to adequately account for the problem of experience as he conceives it. The dignity of Cohen's pure thought and his transcendental unity of consciousness, which safeguards knowledge from the transitory nature of empirical experience, is achieved at the expense of the subordination of experience and empirical reality to a purely formal and logical method. Before moving onto Benjamin's critique, I examine the other side of the neo-Kantian coin: Heinrich Rickert's attempt to justify history as an epistemologically grounded science while, at the same time, demonstrating the limits of the applicability of the methods of natural science to historical and cultural objects. In light of this, Rickert aims to provide an epistemologically grounded historical science that can do justice to the individuality and uniqueness of empirical reality.

3.2 The Problem of Concept-Formation in History

The chief rival of Cohen's "Marburg School" of neo-Kantianism was the "South-West German School" represented by Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert. My examination will focus on Rickert, whose lectures Benjamin attended in 1913 along with Martin Heidegger. As I mentioned above, Benjamin maintains the importance of Rickert's influence as late as 1940. Rickert's concern with the problem of *concept-formation*, particularly Rickert's conception of the relationship concrete particularity and the universal, sets up some of the problematic that Benjamin engages with in his early philosophical work. The main concern of the South-West School was, in contrast to Marburg's concern with logic and the physiology of the senses, the theory of *values* and *culture*. Rickert's aim was to develop a *transcendental philosophy of culture*.⁴⁴ Or, in other words, to provide a basis for historical knowledge that was critical in the Kantian sense.

Despite a different area of inquiry, Rickert takes a similar approach as the Marburg School in emphasizing the foundational role of a philosophically grounded theory of knowledge. Therefore, a similar motif emerges in both of the schools of neo-Kantianism around the centrality of epistemological problems, played out in the Rickert's case not in relationship to science, but to history. This is put quite clearly by Rickert in his text, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science*: "For us, epistemology has become a matter of

⁴⁴ Schnädelbach, *German Philosophy: 1831-1933*: 58.

good conscience, and we will not be prepared to listen to anyone who fails to justify his ideas on this basis.”⁴⁵

Like Cohen, Rickert aims to return philosophy to its foundational role. However, for Rickert, it was essential to maintain a critical distance from both natural scientific and historicist approaches.⁴⁶ *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science* is a text dedicated to examining the nature and limit of concept formation natural science in order to demonstrate the necessity of a science of history that is distinct from both a subjective historicism and the eternal and universal natural sciences. For Rickert, any *Weltanschauung* that is constructed on the basis of the exclusivity of the natural sciences “will inevitably lead to a lamentable impoverishment of intellectual life.”⁴⁷ Natural science is solely concerned with the universal and the general in contrast to a historical science that must concern itself with the particular and the concrete. The concepts of natural science necessarily lack any form of spatiotemporal specificity since their validity must be eternal. In light of this, Rickert’s project does not aim to criticize the natural sciences or their conception of knowledge as such. Rather, he locates the limits of the mathematical natural sciences in order to open up the possibility of a historical science that is able to address the unique and the particular, i.e. that which is spatiotemporally specific.

Rickert, therefore, equally rejects the historicist *Weltanschauung* based exclusively on a subjective notion of spirit and culture: “There are limits to history just as there are limits to natural science.”⁴⁸ Rickert begins with natural science due the prevalence of the scientific world-view; this prevalence is a direct result of the subjective nature of historicism. Rickert begins from the rejection of the traditional distinction and opposition between a subjective *Giestwissenschaft* and objective *Naturwissenschaft*. Rather, Rickert’s defence of history begins from the perspective of its logic as a *science of reality*. Rickert’s defence of history as a science

⁴⁵ Heinrich Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural-science: A logical introduction to the historical sciences* trans. Guy Oakes. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1986), 19-21. Rickert appears resigned to an epistemological method after a period of “philosophical pusillanimity”. Rickert, like Cohen, wishes to return philosophy to the dignified status it held prior to the separation between the spiritual and natural sciences by emphasizing the relationship between philosophy and science. As result of his emphasis on logic and methodology the epistemological standpoint of neo-Kantianism “may have helped to alienate philosophy from the interests of the larger public.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18. While Rickert acknowledges the importance of the developments of science, he does not wish to posit the identity of philosophy and natural science. As he states, it is essential that philosophy maintain the independence of its method: “Philosophy itself can employ neither the method of natural science nor that of history. It must, rather, maintain its autonomy vis-à-vis *all* the individual sciences.”

⁴⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18.

is not the defence of *Geistwissenschaft* in opposition to *Naturwissenschaft*, therefore, but a methodological and epistemological investigation into the logic of concept formation in history. Historical science differs from natural science methodologically insofar as historical science does not subsume the particular under the universal, but it remains a science of reality nonetheless. Rickert defends history as a form of science whose process of concept formation differs methodologically from natural science, yet as a science of reality deserves the same dignity as those of natural science. The attitude is echoed in the work of Max Weber who was heavily influenced by Rickert's work: "For the meaning of history as a science of reality can only be that it treats particular elements of reality not merely as heuristic instruments but as the objects of knowledge, and particular causal connections not as premises of knowledge but as real causal factors."⁴⁹ The importance of history as a science can only be justified if it can be given the dignity of a science of reality. Rickert echoes Cohen's attempt to raise idealist philosophy above the subjectivism that he sees as characteristic of logics of being. He aims to avoid the subjectivism usually attributed to history as a form of *Geistwissenschaft* while providing an objective scientific basis for its concepts and observations on reality.

At the heart of Rickert's attempt to provide a scientific basis for history is a distinction between the form of concept-formation in history and natural science. Rickert demonstrates the limits of concept-formation in natural science in order to establish the legitimacy of the historical science as a *science of reality*. What does Rickert posit as the limit of concept formation in natural science? For him, the unique and individual character of empirical reality cannot, for purely logical reasons, be subsumed under the concepts of natural science. Thus, the particularity of empirical reality "can be represented only in sciences we are obliged to call *historical*, if it is to be an object of scientific treatment at all."⁵⁰ Natural science, in contrast, operates by way of the opposite logic: it requires the progressive elimination of the individual in its process of concept formation.⁵¹ The concepts of natural science are based on a distinction between the 'content of *concepts*' and the '*reality* of sense perception' or the difference between concept and reality. The empirical reality of sense perception cannot be fully subordinated to the concepts of natural science.

⁴⁹ Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1949), 135.

⁵⁰ Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural-science*: 34.

⁵¹ Ibid., 37. As Rickert states, "[t]he individual in the strict sense is absent from even the most primitive form of natural scientific concepts. In the final analysis, natural science entails that everything real is fundamentally one and the same, and thus no longer contains anything that is individual."

For Rickert, the more developed natural sciences become the further we depart from the real conceived as “unique, perceptual and individual”.⁵² Therefore, the limit of concept formation in the natural sciences is the empirical reality itself; natural scientific concepts are unable, because of their universality and generality, to fully subsume the concrete actuality and individuality of empirical reality. However, for Rickert, the concepts of natural science should not be expected to reproduce reality as such. Like Cohen, Rickert does not claim that concepts are representational reproductions of reality.

To expect scientific concepts to reproduce reality in the full force of its particularity would be to misunderstand the nature of natural science and the relationship between concepts and reality. The totality of nature is infinite and, therefore, beyond any form of conceptual representation or reproduction. As Rickert states in, *Science and History*, “[e]mpirical reality proves to be an *immeasurable manifold* which seems to become greater and greater the more deeply we delve into it and begin to analyse it and study its particular parts.”⁵³ Natural scientific concepts are true and in intimate connection with reality only insofar as their generalisations hold true in the particular instance of their application rather than as conceptual mirrors of the infinite manifold of empirical reality.⁵⁴ The concepts of natural science are more complete the more universal they become, but, at the same time, the more universal they become the more they are removed from reality. Ideal or ‘nonreal’ scientific concepts have access to the infinity of reality only through their unconditional and general validity, not through their status as accurate representations of reality.⁵⁵

What Rickert means by concept is not something that can encompass and reproduce the whole of reality, but something that abstracts what is essential from the material of knowledge. Further, rather than being mere reproductions of reality, concepts transform the content of reality in a “generally valid fashion on the basis of specific perspectives”.⁵⁶ In light of this, Rickert inquires into the possibility of a form of science

⁵² Ibid., 39.

⁵³ Heinrich Rickert, *Science and History: A Critique of Positivist Epistemology* trans. George Reisman. (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1962), 32.

⁵⁴ Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural-science*: 43-4 “The concepts of the natural sciences are true, not because they reproduce reality as it actually exists but because they represent what holds validly for reality. If this condition is satisfied, there is no longer any reason to require that natural science encompass reality itself.”

⁵⁵ This echoes Helmholtz’ signal theory of perception which I examined in the first chapter. Despite their many disagreements, neo-Kantianism can be generally said to hold the position, articulated by Helmholtz, which claims that concepts are non-representational. This position can be contrasted with conceptual realism as I will show later on in this chapter.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 46.

that does not simply generalise from the particular, but is able to take an interest in the particular itself.

For Rickert, natural science is characterised by its lack of spatiotemporal specificity. This means that it is universally and invariably valid, but, at the same time, he claims that a generalizing science cannot account for the individual and the particular. With this concept of science as universally and invariably valid, Rickert locates the limit of concept formation in natural science. It is also here we can find the basic formulation of his position in regards to the difference between natural and historical science as sciences of reality:

Suppose we want to know something about the uniqueness, distinctiveness, and individuality of the real. Then we cannot turn to a science for whose concepts the unique and individual configuration of the real event, as well as its perceptual configuration, sets a limit. On the contrary, if there is to be a representation of reality with reference to its uniqueness and individuality, a science is required that diverges logically from natural science in essential points concerning the form of its concept formation.⁵⁷

What are these points of distinction? First and foremost, empirical reality is situated in time and space. Any science that aims to deal with the particular must acknowledge that the particular occurs in a specific time and place while the general does not. The scientific investigation of the particular is, for Rickert, always the investigation of an event that has taken place at a particular time and place. Thus, he describes the *historical science* as a science of the unique and individual even if that event occurred in the past.

History differs from natural science from a logical perspective as well. This means that, for Rickert, the task of the historical science cannot be carried out from the perspective of the natural sciences. Unlike natural science, historical science attempts to represent the unique and individual character of reality. Here, Rickert follows Georg Simmel⁵⁸ in conceiving of history as a science of reality that attempts to represent it in its uniqueness and individuality. In doing so, history's concepts stand in a closer relationship to reality than those of natural science. From the point of view of natural science, the real appears as an irrational manifold of particularities. By universalising and generalising from the particular, the concepts of natural science are able to give the infinite manifold of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁸ See Georg Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History: An Epistemological Essay* trans. Guy Oakes. (Chicago: Free Press, 1977), 132. As Simmel states in regards to status of history as a science, "Obviously the temporal reality of history falls under a category that is completely different from the timeless validity of [natural] laws. But history never establishes the existence of being as such; *it can only confirm a given existential content*. Therefore history is on firm grounds in relation to the concrete facts of temporal reality only if this given existential content is a possible object of a law... Reality cannot be ascribed to any putative historical content that falls under no law of observable and unobservable nature." [My emphasis]

reality a form that allows it to become an object of knowledge. For Rickert, the historical science operates through the same logic. As a science, history too has to form concepts and, therefore, abstract what is essential from the immediacy of experience. What separates historical and natural science is their logical perspective: “*Empirical reality becomes nature when we conceive it with reference to the general. It becomes history when we conceive it with reference to the distinctive and individual.*”⁵⁹ Every science must “destroy the immediacy of reality” since it must abstract what is essential from experience in its “concrete actuality and individuality”. Despite differing approaches to reality, the reality itself does not differ for science or history. Every universal concept of science begins with an individual:

As regards leaves or sulphur... we *automatically* conceive the single individual as nothing more than instances of general concepts. In other words, we pay no attention to what constitutes them as individuals... Here we are interested in individuals as generic cases. Thus we forget what we have done and, in consequence, make no distinction between ‘a leaf’ in the sense of natural science and ‘this particular leaf’ as a distinctive, individual historical fact.⁶⁰

For both historical and natural science, the manifold of reality is infinite. Despite appearances to the contrary the individual piece of sulphur is as incomprehensible to the natural sciences as the singular human individual. In light of this, Rickert is able to claim that the distinction between historical and natural science is epistemological rather than ontological.

Rickert attempts to undermine the everyday assumption that history and science are fundamentally opposed in their conception of reality. On the one hand, it is said that science is concerned with constancy or being and, on the other, history is concerned with the variable and becoming. For Rickert, however, these conceptions of science and history offer antithetical “mirrors of reality”. In contrast, Rickert repeatedly asserts that the difference between science and history is a methodological and logical one: both conceive reality as an infinite manifold and they merely approach this manifold from different perspectives. For Rickert, no real being ever recurs in the same way and, therefore, the opposition between recurrent being—on the side of science—and variable becoming—on the side of history—is meaningless. Thus, the true opposition between history and natural science is the logical difference between the “*general*—that which is valid for different places and times, or that which is universally and invariably valid—and the only real,

⁵⁹ Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural-science*. 54.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 57.

individual world of the event and change, in which nothing ever repeats itself exactly.”⁶¹ Nature and history do not deal with separated ontological domains of reality, but the same reality seen from a different point of view.⁶² Rickert’s distinction between science and history is, therefore, merely a formal and logical one.

What is the theory of knowledge that results from these considerations? In general, Rickert is concerned with refuting a theory of either historical or natural science that simply conceives of concepts as mirror images of reality. Such a form of *reflection theory* was, for Rickert, characteristic of the radical empiricist tendencies of early phenomenology and what Simmel terms *historical realism* or *empiricism*. Rose gives a clear characterisation of Rickert’s view of empiricism: “Rickert argued that the twin assumptions of a knowing subject and a reality independent, but somehow connected with it in the medium of representation, were solipsistic and subjective.”⁶³ As I demonstrated in the first chapter, empiricism in the form of scientific materialisms comes under attack in the earliest forms of neo-Kantianism. Both Helmholtz and Lange argued that sensation merely offers signs rather images of the external world, a theory that is generally accepted by both Rickert and Cohen. For Helmholtz scientific theories and concepts do not provide copies [*Abbilder*] or images [*Bilder*] of a substantial reality of things behind concept, but a system of formal signs designating the law-like relations between concepts. As I will show in the next chapter, Benjamin also takes up this criticism in his essay on Hölderlin.

From an epistemological perspective, the actual content of sense perception is not the subject of their investigation. As Rickert states in the *Limits of Concept Formation*, “empirical reality... from an epistemological standpoint, is already constituted as the formed material of the empirical sciences.”⁶⁴ In this sense, historical science also confronts its object of inquiry as an already formed material in the form of historical sources. According to Rickert, ‘mere experience’ cannot be an object of either natural or historical science since it cannot be given a general form for the purposes of cognition. Concept formation in history always occurs *post festum* and, therefore, even though it begins logically from the individual it involves the re-experiencing of the particular in order to grasp the “individual complexes of meaning” in the form of general concepts.⁶⁵ Therefore, all

⁶¹ Ibid., 60.

⁶² Rickert, *Science and History*: 56.

⁶³ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*: 12.

⁶⁴ Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural-science*: 67.

⁶⁵ Rickert, *Science and History*: 65.

sciences, including the historical, must subordinate the particular to a universal. What, separates the historical from the scientific is a concept of *value*. In contrast to the object of the historical sciences, the object of scientific inquiry—nature—is devoid of any value.⁶⁶

In contrast to historical realism, historical science deals with cultural phenomena that are conceived as meaningful, as objects possessing *value*. The historical science can only be considered objective insofar as it confronts the world of values as objectively valid. For Rickert, the validity of value differs from the validity and objectivity of the laws of nature: “Values are not realities, either physical or psychical. The nature consists entire in their *acceptance as valid*; they have no real being as such or existential *actuality* in their own right. However, values are *connected* with real entities.”⁶⁷ Although, Rickert points towards a notion of *social validity*, in order for history to be conceived objectively as a science, it must not be concerned with normative considerations about how value is established.⁶⁸ For Rickert, making value-judgements is unscientific.

This takes us back to Rickert’s critique of empiricism, which Rickert defines as the “view according to which not only the material but also the governing perspectives from which we work on it have a purely empirical validity.”⁶⁹ Empiricism does not appear to pose much of a problem for the natural sciences since natural scientific concepts can be brought into conformity with an empiricist epistemology. However, as Rickert asserts, even in relation to the natural sciences a consistent empiricism would fail because natural laws have a *metaempirical* import. In other words, the claim that there are general natural laws that go beyond experience already exhausts empiricism; it goes beyond finite experience to the infinite manifold of reality. For Rickert, even if we were to accept empiricism, the historical science would represent its limit since the objectivity and unity of historical concepts must be established at a metaempirical level in reference to a non-physical conception of value.⁷⁰ This, however, is essentially as far as Rickert’s logical examination can take us. He makes a clear and logical distinction between the value-free natural sciences and a historical science that is oriented around a concept of value.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 99. As Rickert writes, “Nature is the *whole* of psycho-physical reality conceived in a generalizing manner as indifferent to value.” The world of nature and the realm of culture are posited separately.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 88-9. “It is not, in fact, the proper task of the historian to decide whether or not things are *valuable*, but only to represent the past as it *really was*, for his orientation is theoretical not practical.”

⁶⁹ Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural-science*: 195.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 202. Rickert stresses the conceptual nature of value: “Whoever proposes to acquire knowledge of the past in its unique and individual development can grasp it only by means of concepts that have an individual content, and whose elements are consolidated with respect to a value to form a unity.”

The historical science remains essentially value-free in the sense that it does not posit values: “Instead of concerning what ought to be, [history] establishes only what *is*.”⁷¹ The historical science, like all sciences, is essentially theoretical rather than practical. The role of historical science is to distinguish logically between what is essentially essential and what is inessential in history. However, for Rickert, this distinction is logical rather than normative. Therefore, it does not involve a value judgement: the fact that the French Revolution was important for the development of the French civilization should not imply praise or blame. Behind Rickert’s conception of a value-free historical science is a notion of historical development; the individual developments of history gain their meaning and value from their sequel “in so far as the significance that attaches to an event by virtue of its relevance to some value is *transmitted* to its preconditions.”⁷² Despite this conception of historical development, Rickert shrewdly avoids a notion of progress or teleology that, for him, belongs to the philosophy rather than the science of history. Progress interprets the meaning of historical events in relation to the values expressed in such an event and undertakes a value-judgement on the past in terms of whether or not a historical event adequately realises the values attached to it.⁷³

Despite Rickert’s distinction between progress and development, there remains a question in regards to the legitimacy of Rickert’s subordination of the particular to the universal. For Rickert, “[t]he ‘universal’ of history is not the *universal law of nature* or the universal concept in respect to which every particular is only one case among and indefinitely large multitude of others, but *cultural value*.”⁷⁴ However, the distinction between nature and history must appear false if Rickert’s concept of history as value-free is to hold sway. If the historian is meant to distinguish the essential from the inessential in the past, he can only do so from the perspective of its highest development. In this way, the particular moments are always subordinated within the totality of historical development. Thus, a value-free conception of history always contains an implicit value judgement in regards to the legitimacy and validity of that development. The essentiality of each event in the development of history is irrefutable from the standpoint of logic in which the objective validity of each event is established retroactively with reference to the step that follows. Any moments of developmental discord are regarded as waste products in the

⁷¹ Rickert, *Science and History*: 89.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

logical process of historical development. In this way, the development of values—historical development—does not appear all that different from a universal law of nature at least at the level of its logical necessity and causality. Rickert's conception of history as an objective science is further enforced by his claim that while the methods of science and history differ, they merely represent two methods that deal with the same reality.

Rickert's conception of reality takes us back to Weber's claim that for history to become a science it too must be interested in discovering causal laws rather than merely focusing on individual objects. With this a further problem creeps through the backdoor: despite Rickert's convincing refutation of empiricism, is it possible that he remains tied to the scientific worldview that he aims to undermine? Specifically, despite his acknowledgement that the world of values differs from the reality of natural science, must he not approach that world of values as objective and ready-made because of his methodological presupposition of the dignity of scientific objectivity and validity? In regards to validity, the Southwest School certainly appears similar to the Marburg School: the validity of concepts cannot be established within consciousness as the agreement of a concept with an object in the act of judgement. The logic of validity must be separated from being, i.e. what merely is, in order to remain prior to the act of judging. As Rose states, "validity does not depend on the judging subject or consciousness. For it belongs to the very meaning of affirming a judgement that the prescription thereby acknowledged has a validity independent of the act of acknowledgement."⁷⁵ Despite Rickert's emphasis of the particular in the historical science, that particular must be subordinated conceptually to a universal in order to be conceived as a valid object of knowledge.⁷⁶

Rickert asserts the dignity of history as an objective and value-free science. For Rose, it is in a shared notion of validity that we can locate the unity of the traditionally opposed Marburg and South-West Schools of neo-Kantianism: both schools turn Kant's transcendental logic into an autonomous logic of validity [*Geltungslogik*] "based on an original, underivable unity which is not the unity of consciousness".⁷⁷ Further, their shared logic of validity is based on a conception of cognition and concept-formation that is conceived of as fundamentally nonrepresentational. As a result, empirical reality is, for both

⁷⁵ Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*: 13.

⁷⁶ Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural-science*: 205. As Rickert states, "Thus we see that history also requires a metaempirical element if its form of comprehension... are not to be inferior in scientific significance to the forms of natural science."

⁷⁷ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*: 14.

Cohen and Rickert, subordinated to logic of validity that transcends finite existence. The realm of values, in the case of Rickert, or the logic of pure thought, in the case of Cohen, exists prior any subjective form of judgment. It is only on this solid a priori foundation that the objectivity of a transcendental idealist philosophy could be established. In Cohen, this takes the form of a genetic pure logical thought that precedes the break between subject and object. In Rickert's case, the factual existence of the realm of values precedes any form of subjective reflection on those values. Thus, in both cases, objective validity is established outside of and prior to the specificity of spatiotemporal experience.

Despite the similarities that Rose points towards, it is important not to conflate these two neo-Kantian philosophies, especially since Benjamin develops his critique of neo-Kantianism most explicitly against Cohen. The difference between the two can be grasped in their respective perspective towards the reality of existence. Or, in other words, the difference between Cohen's "logical idealism" and what I term Rickert's "transcendental empiricism". As Friedman states, the South-West school "affirms an explicitly dualistic conception according to which the realm of pure thought stands over and against a not yet synthesised manifold of sensation (a not yet formed 'matter'), whereas the Marburg School strives, above all, to avoid this dualism."⁷⁸ In order to overcome this dualism, as I have shown, Cohen's logical idealism rejects a concept of external reality existing prior to his genetic conception of pure logical thought. In contrast to Cohen, Rickert attempts to provide a position through which the infinite manifold of reality, which *exists* over and against pure conceptual thought, can become a valid object of knowledge for historical and natural science. In marking a distinction between scientific and historical concepts, Rickert appears to be opposed to Cohen's extension of his pure transcendental logic based on the "fact" of mathematical natural science across all the diverse spheres of knowledge.

Despite their shared epistemological starting point, Cohen's trust in the infinite progress of science is clearly not mirrored in Rickert's conception of historical science. The fact that Rickert sees the necessity of a historical science of reality is indicative of the limit he perceives in pure mathematical natural science and its conception of experience.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*: 31.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Friedman outlines Cohen's general attitude to scientific progress and the relationship between scientific progress and knowledge of reality: "The object of knowledge itself, as the 'reality' standing over and against pure thought, is simply the ideal limit point—the never completed 'X'—towards which the methodological progress of science is converging."

Further, it is possible that by making a distinction between a logical and philosophical account of history, Rickert leaves the door open to a deeper philosophical reflection on the relationship between science and history that is foreclosed in Cohen's presupposition of the fact of the pure mathematical science. In this light, Rickert leaves us with an interesting claim that he does not develop: "A point of unification may lie *beyond* nature and history, but it can never be found *within* one of these two mutually exclusive concepts."⁸⁰ This point of unification would exceed Rickert's domain of inquiry and, therefore, he may have left it undeveloped as a necessary result of the nature of his reflections.

3.3 The Concept of Experience in Kant and neo-Kantianism

How does Benjamin relate to this tradition? In the two texts I examine at length in this section—his fragment "On Perception" and his essay "The Program of the Coming Philosophy"—Benjamin problematizes the Kantian and neo-Kantian epistemological standpoint. Kant, Benjamin claims, began from a very narrow concept of experience:

As an experience or view of the world, it was of the lowest order. The very fact that Kant was able to commence his immense work under the constellation of the Enlightenment indicates that he undertook his work on the basis of an experience virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance. Indeed, one can say that the very greatness of his work, his unique radicalism, presupposed an experience which had almost no intrinsic value and which could have attained its (we may say) sad significance only through its certainty.⁸¹

While it is true that Kant, especially in the *Prolegomena*, derived his principles of experience from natural science, particularly mathematical physics, he did not aim to make experience identical to the "object realm" of science. Despite this, Kant restricted the possible objects of experience to those of Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics insofar as the experience that counted for Kant was a form of scientific experience. The Kantian emphasis on this objective and certain form of scientific experience implicitly leads to a separation between experience in the everyday sense (empirical experience) of the word and pure knowledge (scientific experience).

In contrast to the Kantian non-identity of knowledge and experience, Benjamin locates a different trend in neo-Kantianism. Specifically, he recognises that the neo-

⁸⁰ Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural-science*: 193.

⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 101.

Kantians attempt to provide a systematic unity of knowledge. Whether or not this is successful remains to be seen, but it remains an important point of difference between Kant and neo-Kantianism. Unlike Kant, the neo-Kantians were not satisfied in leaving areas of knowledge, such as religion, unsystematised. Therefore, as I have shown, neither Cohen nor Rickert were exclusively concerned with scientific knowledge, but were interested in aesthetics, religion and ethics in the case of Cohen and history and culture in the case of Rickert. In light of this, it is essential to grasp the distinction between Kant and neo-Kantianism in Benjamin's critique.

I propose to evaluate Benjamin's critique of Kant and neo-Kantianism on the basis of the two-fold problem of experience he poses: "First of all, there was the question of the certainty of knowledge that is lasting, and, second, there was the question of the dignity [*dignität*] of an experience that is ephemeral."⁸² For Benjamin, Kant was only able to give an answer to the first since his aim was to secure the timeless validity and certainty of cognition. In regards to neo-Kantianism, in order to secure the integrity of cognition from the ephemeral nature of experience their concepts had to be purified of any content taken from sensible perception. Thus, the price neo-Kantianism paid for dignity and integrity of its epistemology was the subordination of empirical experience to a transcendent conception of pure thought and a strictly logical method.

Before moving onto Benjamin's critique of neo-Kantianism, it is necessary to examine how his critique relates to Kant and, also, how neo-Kantianism interprets Kantian philosophy. This will allow us to navigate Benjamin's apparent conflation of Kant and neo-Kantianism in these texts. It is useful, in this regard, to briefly examine Benjamin's fragment "On Perception", written in 1917, which precedes the 1918 "Program" essay. In this text, the conflation of the Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy appears more pronounced. Benjamin appears to provide a justification for the necessity of the neo-Kantian approach to concept formation from within Kantian critical philosophy. In short, Benjamin appears to largely accept the neo-Kantian problematic in regards to conceptual realism, i.e. the view that concepts are mirror images or accurate reproductions of reality that both Cohen and Rickert rejected.

Benjamin accepts the necessity of a fundamental separation between empirical experience and pure knowledge. The necessity of this separation is found in Kant's aim to

⁸² Ibid., 101. [Translation modified]

avoid the collapse of his metaphysical concept of pure knowledge into the concept of experience. Benjamin locates the a specific meaning of metaphysics in the context of Kant's philosophy: "Kant produced a metaphysics of nature and in it described that part of the natural sciences which is pure—that which proceeds not from experience but simply from reason a priori."⁸³ This conception of knowledge faced potential problems from two sides. On one side, there is the empiricist problem of a collapse of sensibility into the understanding. As a result, knowledge becomes subjective; it is conceived of as a product of experience. On the other hand, there is the rationalist problem of a discontinuity between knowledge and experience. In order to avoid this problematic, as Benjamin states, Kant posited "the so-called material of sensation to express the separation of the forms of intuition from the categories."⁸⁴ Though this, Kant was able ground the continuity of a posteriori experience and knowledge while retaining the necessary separation between pure knowledge and empirical experience. The separation was achieved through the forms of intuition in which, as Benjamin puts it, the material of sensation is "imperfectly absorbed".

For Benjamin, despite the scrutiny that Kant gives to metaphysics qua pure cognition, the concept of experience does not undergo the same critical treatment. Benjamin raises a fundamental distinction between the concept of experience [*der Begriff Erfahrung*] and the cognition of experience [*Erkenntnis der Erfahrung*]. These, he claims, have often been conflated in both Kantian and pre-Kantian philosophy. Due to this conflation, the differences between the immediate natural concept of experience and cognition of experience have become confused. For Benjamin, this confusion is symptomatic of the Kantian and neo-Kantian distinction between the conceptual realm of pure scientific thought and empirical existence. As I demonstrated throughout this chapter, the neo-Kantian approach to concept-formation rested on a strict distinction of the pure conceptual and the empirical. In contrast, Benjamin does not simply reject the existence of metaempirical concepts as such. Rather, he posits an alternative notion of the concept that undermines the strict distinction between concept and reality.

Benjamin illustrates the confusion about the nature of concepts by means of an example: a painting of a landscape copies the landscape, but the landscape itself does not occur in the painting. As I demonstrated in Cohen and Rickert's critique of empiricism,

⁸³ Walter Benjamin, "On Perception" in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 93.

⁸⁴ Benjamin, "On Perception": 94.

concepts are not mirror images or reproductions of reality. Rather, concepts work by abstraction: it is only in the subordination of finite empirical experience to a concept that the infinite manifold of reality is given *form*. It is only as such that empirical experience becomes a proper object of cognition.⁸⁵ Here, Benjamin seems to follow the neo-Kantian approach to concept formation: experience qua natural experience cannot occur in the knowledge of experience. Rather, in order to secure its continuity and give it the quality of being a possible object of cognition, cognition of experience must be unified at a level that exceeds transitory sense experience. As Benjamin claims, at this point we are talking about two different conceptual realms—one empirical or experiential and the other conceptual.

What Benjamin terms as cognition of experience operates at the level of the pure scientific knowledge, not concrete experience. For Kant “experience as an object of cognition is the unified and continuous manifold of cognition.”⁸⁶ In other words, it is only in the form of abstract objective experience that experience as such can become a proper object of cognition in the Kantian sense. According to Benjamin, the experience that counted for Kant was that which could be granted the status of objective validity, i.e. that form of experience that Benjamin terms *scientific experience*. Kant had to separate what he understands as pure experience from natural or empirical experience in order to secure it as a valid object of knowledge. Therefore, for Kant cognition is, as Benjamin insisted above, the system of nature, but with the caveat that the system of nature is by no means merely what is intuited sensibly.

Neo-Kantianism appears to follow Kant to the letter in its approach to concept-formation. Yet Benjamin notes a subtle yet important shift between Kant’s critical philosophy and neo-Kantianism. Benjamin describes neo-Kantianism as a speculative yet transcendental philosophy while Kantian idealism is described as a transcendental philosophy of experience. By speculative, Benjamin means a philosophy that deduces the

⁸⁵ Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*: 82. Here, Benjamin echoes Simmel, another neo-Kantian with whom he was intimately familiar: “The work of art represents reality in a medium which has completely new points of refraction. Within this medium, reality is transformed into a world which has its own order... This order is independent of the theoretical idea which represents the relationship between the real substances that underlie these surface phenomena.”⁸⁵ The artwork does not reproduce reality, it organises it in respect to a notion form. While the object of its representation is an individual phenomena, the artwork remains at a distance from the concrete phenomena it represents. Thus, from the perspective of the viewer, the image presents itself as experience through an abstraction from concrete particularity. While Simmel admits that scientific concepts do not share the individual subjective and creative character of artistic creations, like Rickert he asserts that science also forms concepts through the abstraction of the essential from the material of knowledge.

⁸⁶ Benjamin, “On Perception”: 95.

totality of cognition from a first principle. As Benjamin states, Kant refused to accept a position that advocated the possibility of the “deducibility of the world from the supreme principle or nexus of knowledge.”⁸⁷ Thus, as Benjamin notes and as I demonstrated in Chapter 1, Kant was generally opposed to speculative approaches, such as hylozoism, that exceed experience.

Kant could not allow the deduction of knowledge from experience in the ordinary sense of the word, nor could he advocate a purely speculative deduction of knowledge from a first principle. As Benjamin states, “[w]e may perhaps venture the supposition that in an age in which experience was characterised by an extraordinary superficiality and godlessness, philosophy... could have no interest in salvaging this experience for its concept of knowledge.”⁸⁸ Kant had to provide continuity between a posteriori empirical experience and knowledge while, at the same time, maintaining a separation between “the ordinary meaning of experience” and his conception of scientific experience. The Kantian concept of experience is based on an abstraction and hypostasis from empirical experience. The kind of experience that counts for Kant in the ‘context of knowledge’ is not empirical experience, but a notion of scientific experience; a form of experience given the dignity of objective validity that transitory sense experience lacks. Thus, Kant introduces a necessary discontinuity between cognition and experience in order to secure the validity and certainty of knowledge.

According to Benjamin, it is precisely on the discontinuity between cognition and experience that Kant distinguished himself from the pre-Enlightenment tradition. For Benjamin, the pre-Enlightenment or rationalist tradition had an exalted conception of experience, one that was close to God. As such, the possibility of a rationalist deduction of knowledge from a first principle, i.e. the Absolute, or an empiricist deduction of knowledge from experience was deemed possible. The concept of experience that characterised the Enlightenment had, in contrast, been “stripped of its proximity to God.”⁸⁹ In conceiving of God as remote from both nature and existence, the concept of experience had been implicitly transformed. What Kant provided was the methodological grounds by which such an impoverished form of experience can become a valid object of knowledge, i.e. one that is objective and universal. In order to guarantee the certainty and objectivity of

⁸⁷ Ibid., 94.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

knowledge an appeal to principles beyond mere experience is necessary. Thus, a discontinuity between experience and pure cognition is introduced and the Newtonian and Euclidean conceptions of space and time become the valid forms of pure sensible intuition.⁹⁰

The Kantian discontinuity between experience and cognition can be seen clearly in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*: “What can be called *proper science* is only that whose certainty is apodictic; cognition [*Erkenntnis*] that can contain mere empirical certainty is only *knowledge* [*Wissen*] improperly so called.”⁹¹ In the *CPR*, Kant states that the principles of *space* and *time* cannot be deduced from experience since that deduction would not yield *strict universality* or *apodictic certainty*.⁹² Empirical or *improper science* derives its laws from experience and, as such, lacks consciousness of their necessity, i.e. apodictic certainty. This is characteristic of chemistry which Kant describes as a “systematic art” rather than a science.⁹³ In contrast, as Kant states in the *Prolegomena*, “space and time are the intuitions upon which pure mathematics bases all its cognitions and judgements, which come forward as at once apodictic and necessary.”⁹⁴ Proper natural science is based on a presupposition of a metaphysics of nature based on pure a priori principles that are not borrowed from experience. These metaphysical principles “bring the manifold of *empirical representations* into the law-governed connection through which it can become empirical **cognition**, that is, experience.”⁹⁵

On this point, Friedman notes an affinity between Kant and Cohen: both Kantian idealism and Cohen’s scientific idealism claim that mathematical physics—pure science—offered an exemplary method for the application of the categories to objects of experience. Further, in this text Kant emphasises the methodological approach through which empirical experience becomes an object of knowledge. In light of this, Friedman points to

⁹⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁹¹ Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, p. 4. Here we can see a Kantian basis for the critique of scientific materialism that endorsed the certainty of the senses and Helmholtz and Lange’s early form of neo-Kantianism that offered a psycho-physical reading of Kant’s philosophy.

⁹² See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*: A31/B47. Such a deduction would only be able to say “[t]his is what common perception teaches, but not: “This is how matters must stand.” Apodictic certainty, therefore, contains within it a consciousness of the necessity of pure a priori laws.

⁹³ Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, p. 4. I discuss the distinction between conceptual and empirical science when I engage with Benjamin and romanticism in the next chapter.

⁹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* trans. Gary Hatfield. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 34/4:282.

⁹⁵ Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*: 4 See also, Friedman, *Kant and the Exact Sciences*: 37. As Friedman claims, “the mathematical exact sciences which delimit the form and principles of the spatio-temporal phenomenal world-constitute the conditions of the possibility of empirical knowledge.”

a correspondence between Kant and neo-Kantianism at the epistemological level. Both Kant and neo-Kantianism reject the notion that the cognition of objects is a mere representation of either entities existing independently beyond or behind our sense experience. They also both reject the empiricist view that claims that unconceptualised sense experience is the basis of true knowledge.⁹⁶

The significance of Kant's departure from both empiricism and rationalism is found in his claim that the object of knowledge does not exist independently of judgement. Rather, the object of knowledge is constituted when chaotic sense data is brought under a priori categories becoming, what Kant called above, empirical cognition or an object of experience. Thus, empirical cognition is configured in reference to a priori transcendental structures. These a priori structures provide a mediation between pure forms of judgement or *general logic* and the manifold of sense data. As Friedman states, "the pure logical forms of judgement only become categories in virtue of the transcendental schematism of the understanding—that is, when pure forms of thought are given a determinate spatio-temporal content in relation to the pure forms of sensible intuition."⁹⁷ The manifold of sensation is set against pure forms of logical thought. The problem that arises here, for Kant, is how to apply the forms of pure thought in order to make objects of sensation a possible object of cognition.

Marburg neo-Kantianism breaks with Kant when it rejects space and time as independent forms of pure sensibility. For Kant, the a priori forms of pure sensible intuition provide the basis on which the manifold of sense data can become an object of experience. For Cohen, experience must be constituted on the basis of non-spatio-temporal purely logical and conceptual a priori structures. As I have shown above, this results in Cohen's conception of logical idealism whose subject is an ideal realm of pure logical structures secured from the transitory nature of sense experience. This is Cohen's most significant break with Kant: his conception of pure thought is based on the rejection of Kant's dualistic claim that knowledge has its origin in both the active faculty of the understanding, on one side, and a passive faculty of sensibility that exists independently of the understanding, on the other. Cohen rejects the independent mediating faculty of pure

⁹⁶ Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*: 26. As Friedman states, "In the first case... knowledge or true judgement would be impossible for us, since, by hypothesis, we have absolutely no independent access to such entities... In the second case (naïve empiricism) knowledge or true judgement would be equally impossible, for the stream of unconceptualised sense experience is in fact utterly chaotic and intrinsically undifferentiated."

⁹⁷ Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*: 27.

intuition. Cohen is able to overcome the problems that this rejection introduces by incorporating what he calls the “fact” of the pure mathematical science. By incorporating the “fact” of pure mathematic science into his logical method, Cohen is able to subordinate sensibility to the understanding through an extension of the transcendental logic to the forms of sensible intuition. For Cohen, this is possible since the space and time are conceived merely principles derived from the fact of science. Cohen’s pure logical thought then becomes the basis for scientific experience in contradistinction to what he considers Kant’s ultimately empiricist concept of experience based upon the faculties of sensible intuition.

3.4 Benjamin and neo-Kantianism

For Benjamin the Kantian and neo-Kantian emphasis on the knowledge of experience qua scientific experience has led to a narrowing of the possible objects of experience. Benjamin notes the specific problem with the form of post-Kantian philosophy that emanates from Kant’s metaphysics of nature. In Benjamin words, it is a “metaphysics that has become rudimentary.”⁹⁸ Kant’s epistemology remains within the domain of a strict division between subject and object, a division that is presupposed as natural in the Kantian system.⁹⁹ For Benjamin, a concept of experience derived from this division is a form of myth: it treats that division as a natural division, it is presupposed. In light of its mythical status, Benjamin compares the theory of knowledge derived from such a presupposition to primitive peoples who identify themselves with animals or clairvoyants who claim to feel the sensations of others as their own. This appears hyperbolic, but Benjamin’s point is that Kantian epistemology gives one possible configuration of experience, but does not exhaust the entirety of possible experiences.¹⁰⁰

Implicit within Kant’s theory of knowledge, therefore, is a restriction of the possible objects of experience to those presented through the forms of pure intuition. In other words, experience of the world is mediated conceptually by the laws of Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics. Further, the grounds upon knowledge of the object is

⁹⁸ Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”: 103.

⁹⁹ Ibid. As Benjamin states, “It simply cannot be doubted that the notion, sublimated though it may be, of an individual living ego which receives sensations by means of its senses and forms its ideas on the basis of them plays a role of the greatest importance in the Kantian concept of knowledge.”

¹⁰⁰ Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. (London: Routledge, 1998), 24.

established objectively prohibits the continuity between empirical consciousness and experience qua scientific experience. Genuine knowledge rests on the transcendental consciousness, a pure epistemological consciousness stripped of any subjective character. Despite this separation between knowledge and experience, as Benjamin claims, Kant's transcendental consciousness is formed through an analogy with empirical consciousness. Objectively certain knowledge is produced in relation to an empirical consciousness that, for Benjamin, is characterised by the impoverished experience available to it. This is Benjamin crucial point: Kant objectifies the impoverished concept of experience—the only experience he sees as available to the empirical subject—in the transcendental subject. As such, the limited impoverished concept of experience is hypostasised when it becomes the basis of the Kantian conception of pure knowledge.

In light of this, Benjamin appears to see some promise in the neo-Kantian dissolution of the distinction between intuition and the intellect, something Benjamin also mentions in the fragment “On Perception”. Within the elimination of the distinction between the independent faculty of sensible intuition and the spontaneous faculty of the understanding is a point at which the subject-object logic of Kant's epistemology is undermined. The question is how far can Benjamin take this from within the perspective of neo-Kantianism? In his critique, Benjamin makes clear that in the interest of establishing the continuity of experience, neo-Kantianism represented experience as the system of sciences. As Benjamin claims, the neo-Kantian “rectification” of Kant's separation of sensibility and the understanding ends “in the extreme extension of the mechanical aspect of the relatively empty Enlightenment concept of experience”.¹⁰¹ They remain within the Kantian conception of experience as scientific experience that could not absorb metaphysical experience any more than the material of sensation is absorbed by the forms of sensible intuition. At the precise point at which neo-Kantianism aims to move beyond the Kantian concept of experience it remains tied to the Kantian theory of knowledge. For Benjamin, both Kant and neo-Kantianism remain tied to a concept of experience derived from an Enlightenment worldview that comes to occupy a mythical status in both of philosophies. In their attempt to overcome the object nature of the thing-in-itself, both Kant and neo-Kantianism prioritise a concept of experience and a subject of that experience which is discontinuous with experience in the everyday sense of the world.

¹⁰¹ Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”: 105.

As Benjamin states, “even to the extent that Kant and the neo-Kantians have overcome the object nature of the thing-in-itself as the cause of sensations, there remains the subject nature of the cognizing consciousness to be eliminated.”¹⁰² Eliminating the subject nature of cognizing consciousness was impossible for Kant insofar as the transcendental subject was formed in analogy with the empirical subject. However, neo-Kantianism, for its part, solves this problem through the elimination of the centrality of a knowing subject. As I discussed above, Cohen’s aimed to offer a philosophical idealism without a subject in the traditional sense, since the empirical subject is the subject of error. In order to secure experience from error, neo-Kantianism makes experience identical to the object world of the sciences, something that, Benjamin asserts, was contrary to Kant’s intention. As we saw with Rickert, for neo-Kantianism the various scientific disciplines do not deal with distinct “object worlds”, but merely inquire into reality from distinct epistemological and methodological points of view. In Rickert’s case, the reality that confronts epistemology is already formed in accordance with the principles of science. Despite the fact that Rickert aims towards a historical science that can account for the unique and individual character of empirical reality, he remains tied to a scientific notion of epistemology and concept formation that abstracts what is essential from the experience—the material of knowledge. Experience, even historical experience, only becomes a valid object of knowledge when it is made subordinate to a concept.

Cohen’s account is much less straightforward, but in beginning from the “fact of science” reality is absorbed into pure thought as the object realm to which the methods of pure mathematical scientific are applied. Knowledge becomes objective through its subordination to a transcendental logic distinct from empirical reality and a posteriori experience. While Kant was forced to posit a separation between experience and knowledge, Cohen is able to posit the continuity of knowledge and scientific experience. For Cohen the continuity occurs within pure thought itself through the dissolution of the Kantian distinction between sensibility and the understanding. Cohen achieves what Kant could not within his separation between the faculties of sensibility and understanding. The continuity Cohen establishes, however, is only established through the purification of empirical experience, i.e. within scientific experience and the subordination of a posteriori experience to the logical structures of pure mathematical science.

¹⁰² Ibid., 103.

The solution offered by the neo-Kantians to Kant's separation of knowledge and experience exacerbates the problem for Benjamin. Neo-Kantianism extends the mechanical concept of experience that Benjamin found so problematic in the first place. Further, the mythical separation between subject and object that Kant presupposed becomes the foundation of neo-Kantian epistemology. The given reality of perception—the empirical world—is conceived as an object of knowledge onto which the methods of natural science are continually and progressively converging. The objects that constitute that world are meaningful only insofar as they are objects of, or perhaps better yet, objects for knowledge. As Peter Fenves, claims, within this mechanical concept of experience “there is no object of experience, for objects mean nothing.”¹⁰³ For Benjamin, neo-Kantianism had to reject sense experience in order to secure the continuity of pure scientific knowledge. Cohen's neo-Kantianism pushes the Kantian scientific worldview to its limit by absorbing empirical reality into pure thought; the object of scientific knowledge is not a concrete phenomenal thing, but a purely conceptual idea that exists in total separation from the world of perception and experience. The systematic continuum of knowledge and experience is achieved at the level of scientific knowledge through the extension of a form of transcendental logic. Thus, neo-Kantianism is systematic in a way that the Kantian philosophy could not be, but it only achieves its systematicity by subordinating all forms of experience to its pure logic based on the principles of mathematical natural science.¹⁰⁴ In opposition to the Kantian separation of knowledge and experience, Cohen provides the foundation of the systematic continuity and unity of knowledge through the absolutisation of a genetic conception of pure logical thought.

It is from this perspective that Benjamin claims experience has been reduced to something meaningless, insignificant and without value for neo-Kantianism. Experience only becomes significant when it is objectified and subordinated to metaempirical scientific principles or, as Benjamin states, “through its certainty”.¹⁰⁵ Science requires an object, an

¹⁰³ Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 166.

¹⁰⁴ This is the case, as I demonstrated above, in Cohen's conception of ethics.

¹⁰⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Review of Richard Höningwald's *Philosophie un Sprache*” in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 140. A link between neo-Kantianism and positivism can be perceived in such a concept of knowledge. This is the claim Benjamin makes in a review of the neo-Kantian Richard Höningwald's *Philosophie un Sprache*, written between 1938 and 1939: “the weakness of neo-Kantianism lies in its unconscious complicity with positivism—a complicity which it has always denied.” The dominance of neo-Kantianism in Germany resulted in the loss of “critical and imaginative energies” which was echoed in in the complicity and

object moreover that is objective and certain. For experience to become such an object its timeless validity must be secured. As objects of scientific inquiry, experience and the objects of experience are conceived of as meaningful and significant only insofar as they can be understood as valid objects of knowledge; experience itself is only stable and certain insofar as it becomes objectified as scientific experience. While Benjamin concurs with the neo-Kantian demand for a continuity of experience and knowledge, he disputes the mathematical and scientific foundation of their epistemology that prioritises abstract scientific experience and posits the unity of subject and object of experience within pure logical thought. Cohen's logical idealism posits an unbridgeable gulf between the experiencing subject and the object of experience while, at the same time, stripping objects of their individual significance and meaning.

From this it is possible to discern the twin aims of Benjamin's text. First, the possibility of the continuity of knowledge and experience from the standpoint of concrete empirical experience. Second, the overcoming of the mythic separation of subject and object present in both Kant and neo-Kantianism. As Benjamin states:

The task of future epistemology is to find for knowledge a sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object; in other words to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept no longer continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities.¹⁰⁶

Benjamin does not elaborate at length on this sphere of total neutrality in this text, but it is discussed more prominently both in the essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man", which precedes the "Program" essay by about a year, and his dissertation on Romantic art criticism that follows the "Program" essay. I discuss both of these texts at length in the next chapter, but it is possible to sketch the implications of Benjamin's revision of the Kantian categories. In order to overcome the mechanistic and abstract categories of neo-Kantianism, Benjamin proposes a revision of the Kantian categories founded upon or connected to what he refers to as primal concepts [*Urbegriffe*]. With their mathematical and logical ontology, neo-Kantianism had extended the Aristotelian categories of Kant's transcendental logic that are, for Benjamin, "both arbitrary posed and

adaptation of neo-Kantian philosophy to the "established order". For Benjamin, from Natorp through to Cassirer and Höningwald the critical energy of the early neo-Kantianism had been replaced by a dogmatic belief in the progress of science and "the transcendental questioning had gradually been transformed into a ceremony no longer animated by any real intellectual effort."

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy": 104.

exploited in a very one-sided way by Kant in the light of mechanical experience.”¹⁰⁷ With a new theory of orders, Benjamin claims to be able to expand the possible areas of experience to include those areas that Kant was unable to systematize.¹⁰⁸ While systematic in his intent, the categories of Benjamin’s theory of knowledge would not be imposed externally onto experience from the standpoint of a timelessly valid form of scientific knowledge. Rather, the theory of knowledge itself must be expanded to include a form of experience that Benjamin calls “multiply gradated” and “nonmechanical”.

Benjamin highlights a tension between the Kantian claim that the concepts must be connected to a form of subjective intuition and the neo-Kantian claim that non-representational concepts exists prior to reality in the form of transcendent logical structures. His new theory of orders must be able to overcome this tension by both providing a sphere of pure knowledge from which concepts can be derived while, at the same time, providing a continuity between experience and the concepts that structure experience. This provides the foundation for a theory of knowledge that remains within the spirit of the Kantian philosophy without imposing the limitations of knowledge qua scientific experience. In revising the Kantian theory of knowledge and experience, Benjamin is able to expand the sphere of possible experiences without reducing the object of experience to an object for a specific type of experience. I demonstrate how Benjamin develops this in relation to language and the Romantic philosophy of science in the following chapter. Before moving on, however, I will examine the limit of Cohen’s neo-Kantian philosophy for the coming philosophy as Benjamin conceives of it.

3.5 Religion and the Philosophy of the Future

One possible path for the coming philosophy is the one Benjamin points to in fragment “On Perception”. There, Benjamin writes: “Philosophy is absolute experience deduced in a systematic, symbolic framework as language.”¹⁰⁹ Philosophy consists of what Benjamin refers to as teachings or doctrines [*Lehre*]. Absolute experience is, for Benjamin,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin names art, jurisprudence and history as forms of this experience, but also includes the scientific forms of experience, such as biology, that Kant ignored because, as forms of empirical science, they did not meet the standard of apodictic certainty and objective validity.

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin, “On Perception”: 96.

“articulated in types of language” that include philosophical doctrines of perception.¹¹⁰ The concept of absolute experience stands in obvious contrast to the godless and empty form of abstract scientific experience that Benjamin claims is characteristic of Kant and the Enlightenment tradition. Here, it could be claimed that Benjamin, in positing a concept of absolute experience, is choosing the path of the restoration of a pre-Kantian and pre-Enlightenment notion of absolute experience. The concept of absolute experience would, in its proximity to God, stand immanently fulfilled. Through their shared origin in the act of creation the strict Kantian distinction between subject and object is undermined and a speculative deduction of knowledge from experience becomes permissible.

At first glance, Benjamin appears to see potential in Christian Garve and Moses Mendelssohn’s rationalist critique of Kant. Mendelssohn shared with Garve the view that Kant’s idealism, like Berkeley’s, was radically sceptical. Put simply, Mendelssohn believed that Kant denied the correspondence between external objects and subjective representations. This form of idealism maintained that nothing existed other than mere representations of reality and spiritual beings. It is in this light that they could charge the Kant with a form of atheism. As Beiser states, for Mendelssohn, Kant was unable to account for this point in his ontological argument because “he surreptitiously assumes that the distinction between possibility and reality in the case of a finite being applies *mutatis mutandis* in the case of an infinite being. Hence all his examples that are to prove the distinction between essence and existence are taken from finite beings.”¹¹¹ In beginning from the finite, Kant cannot provide a basis for the *existence* of God.

The point at which Mendelssohn perceives Kant’s radical atheism is, however, the precise point at which Cohen locates the unity of Kantian philosophy and Jewish theology: “the sublimation of God into the Idea. And this is nothing less than the core-meaning of

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 107. It was Mendelssohn’s conception of speculative conception of speculative thought that Kant’s criticised in his post-critical essay “What is orientation in thinking?” There, Kant claimed that in order for abstract or exalted concepts to be suitable for use in the world of experience they had to be tied to figurative notions. For concepts to have sense and significance, Kant asserts, they must be attached to an intuition [*Anschauung*]. It is only through an abstraction from such an intuition—first sense-perception and the forms of pure sensible intuition—through the concrete act of the understanding that the pure concept of the understanding is formed. It is in this way that philosophy can legitimately begin from experience without viewing concepts merely as products of experience. Thus, there is a paradox: while Kant admits that the sensible objects do not exhaust the field of possible experiences, the applications of concepts of the understanding to the supersensible realm is problematic insofar as the supersensuous cannot be an object of experience.

the Jewish God-idea too.”¹¹² Against the pre-Kantian conception of experience, in which experience is conceived of as immanently meaningful in its proximity to God, Cohen takes a perspective that is consistent with his general philosophical approach in which sensible experience has no intrinsic significance and meaning.¹¹³ For Cohen, religion and philosophy are united in their presupposition of the existence of eternal laws as opposed to the transitoriness of earthly institutions or human ideas: “This *eternal*, as the *foundation of reason* in all of its content, the Jew calls revelation.”¹¹⁴ Reason and revelation as eternal and foundational stands in contradistinction to what Cohen refers to as “animal sensuality”:

What in later times has been designated by the term ‘by nature’... in opposition to ‘convention’... is nothing other than that ‘in itself,’ that eternal, that unwritten, which precedes any recorded writing, precedes as it were, any culture, must precede it, because it lays the foundation for every culture.¹¹⁵

For Cohen, as the foundation of both, the eternal is removed from both sensuous and historical experience. The God of Judaism, just like the pure thought of his own philosophy, transcends any form of sensuous appearance.¹¹⁶ Underlying Being is a conception of origin and this is what separates the religion of reason from the form of a myth that fixates itself on the notion of finite temporal origin. It is here that we find the link between Cohen’s conception of religion and his logical idealism: “Reason does not begin with history, but history has to begin with reason. For the beginning has to be more

¹¹² Hermann Cohen, *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Writings of Hermann Cohen* trans. Eva Jospe. (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press), 82. See also, Gillian Rose, “Hermann Cohen—Kant Among the Prophets” in *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2.2 (1993). In her essay on Cohen, Rose elucidates the problems inherent in Cohen’s attempt to conceive of Judaism as a religion of reason in Kantian terms. As she states, “judged as a *reader* of Kant, Cohen destroys critical Kantianism, while as a *reader* of the sources of Judaism, he appears to overlook commandment and law, that is, the sources of Rabbinic Judaism, but apprehended *as a thinker* who brings the sources ‘under a concept,’ he inherits the antinomies in the conceiving of law in Kant and expounds them as the prophetic speculative proposition.”

¹¹³ For Cohen’s treatment of Mendelssohn see Cohen, *Religion of Reason*: 357-8. There, Cohen claims that Mendelssohn effected a cultural change in Judaism by limiting it to a religion of law and viewing the reason of religion as characteristic of reason in general. Cohen, in contrast, sees Jewish monotheism as foundational for both reason and general and religion. It is, therefore, *the* religion of reason rather than a mere expression of reason in general.

¹¹⁴ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*: 83. Although the *Religion of Reason* is published in 1919, a year after Benjamin writes the “Program” essay, it remains consistent with Cohen’s general systematic intent and its conclusions are consistent with positions laid out in his ethical writings. Further, the lectures by Cohen that Benjamin attended at the *Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin chiefly examined religious problems, so it is likely that he was, at the very least, familiar with the themes that Cohen would examine in his *Religion of Reason*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹⁶ Cohen, *Reason and Hope*: 84. As Cohen states, “God’s immaterialness is an absolute prerequisite for His moral efficaciousness.”

than a temporal beginning; it has to mean the eternal origin [*Ursprung*].”¹¹⁷ In the concept of origin there is both creation and preservation or “a notion of newness in becoming.”¹¹⁸ Cohen aims to undermine a mythic notion of temporal origin; an aim mirrored in his theoretical philosophy. In contrast to the fixation on temporal origin or a unique primeval act, Cohen advocates a more scientific approach: “One marvels not so much at the beginning, but rather at the constancy in becoming, the permanency in change. It is always something new, but this newness may have its origin in the same old foundation.”¹¹⁹

Just as philosophy has its origin in the “fact” of the pure mathematical sciences, the religion of reason originates in the idea of monotheism. For Cohen, the idea of monotheism has the same validity as the eternal truths of mathematical science: it makes universal claim that there is only one God just as there is one mathematics for all peoples. The idea of one God, therefore, contains within itself the continuity of a universal conception of mankind. For Cohen, the location of a temporal or national origin of the monotheistic God is irrelevant since the claim to validity and truth of the idea of monotheism is universal, timeless and continuous regardless of the particularity of its spatial-national or temporal-historical origin.¹²⁰

Theology is, therefore, given a rational and logical foundation expressed in Cohen’s conception of origin.¹²¹ Cohen maintains that there is only one reason and, therefore, is able to maintain the independence of religion vis-à-vis philosophy while also maintaining that both share a common root within reason. The importance of this distinction is demonstrated in Cohen’s discussion of Plato. Cohen marks a distinction between Plato’s philosophical and political idealism. Classical thought is oriented to the present whereas

¹¹⁷ See Cohen, *Religion of Reason*: 83 and 63. Cohen discusses his concept of origin which, as he says, is a category in his *Logic of Pure Cognition*. For Cohen, the aim of reason in religion is “to discover what the logical meaning of the origination principle [*Ursprung*] is for the problem of creation.”

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 70.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid. Here we can find the foundation of Cohen’s criticism of Nationalist Zionism. The validity of Judaism as an idea is established through the fact that it remains continuous even after the decline of the Jewish state: “No state, but yet a people. But the people is less for the sake of its own nation than as a symbol for mankind. A unique symbol for the unique idea.”

¹²¹ Ibid., xxiv. As Leo Strauss makes clear, in his introduction to Cohen’s *Religion of Reason*, religion requires the aid of philosophy: “Judaism was not always in every respect the religion of reason. It needed the aid of Platonic and above all of Kantian philosophy to free itself completely from mythical and other irrelevancies.” See also, Poma, 162-3. The place of religion within the system of philosophy is central for Cohen. Therefore, his treatment of religion should not be seen as antithetical or outside of his systematic theoretical work. As Cohen writes in *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*, “If there is to be a philosophy of religion, this problem is only acceptable in the precise sense that religion be placed within the system of philosophy; there is only one type of philosophy and that is systematic.”

Jewish thought is oriented around the establishment of a connection between the present and the eternal.¹²² The difference is related to two different conceptions of history. For the Greeks, history was conceived of as an object of knowledge and their inquiry was directed towards the past. Cohen, in contrast, describes the Prophets as historical idealists; their gaze, was directed into the future towards the idea: “Their vision begot the concept of history, as the being of the *future*.”¹²³ For Cohen, Plato places the good outside of the world of existence and experience—the reality of mathematical and physical science. Plato placed the good “beyond being” outside of sensible space and time. This creates the necessary space for an ethical idealism distinct from nature, but remains limited in its orientation to the present. In light of this, Cohen locates two meanings of the conception of “beyond being”: the first is the Platonic sense in which the good is located beyond the present sensible reality in the sense of an object of science; the second is Cohen’s conception of the Messianic which posits a new actuality beyond history. The good is, in other words, is beyond both the past and the present in its sensuous particularity, but not beyond the concept of history as such. The Messianic idealism of the Prophets provides “a new kind of actuality which surpasses all present and past actuality.

Religious thought has secured this supersensible actuality of the future. The supersensible, earthly future of the human race within its natural development is the creation of Messianism.¹²⁴ Sensibility is described by Cohen as an instrument for “knowing the actual present” in contrast to the supersensible future. As idea, religious thought is the instrument for the supersensible reality or, in other words, an instrument for the future. Against the Platonic “unceasing repetition of the present”, Cohen’s form of Messianism is oriented towards the future. As such, he makes the claim that his Messianic future breaks with both the Romantic idea of a Golden Age and the utopian notion of an ideal that exists beyond the confines of space and time. In contrast, Cohen’s Messianism produces a new actuality that radically transforms the present existence:

Messianism degrades and despises and destroys the present actuality, in order to put in the place of this sensible actuality a new kind of supersensible actuality, not supernatural, but of the future. The future creates a new earth and a new heaven and, consequently, a new actuality.¹²⁵

¹²² Ibid., 83.

¹²³ Ibid., 262.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 293.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 291.

The messianic future is posited over and against the presently existing historical and political reality. This conception of universal history would be impossible from the empirical perspective of either the past or the present: “Mankind did not live in any past and did not become alive in the present; only the future can bring about its bright and beautiful form. This form is an idea, not a shadowy image of the beyond.”¹²⁶

A universal conception of history implies the notion of an “eternal task” and this, in turn, presupposes a notion of the development of mankind towards an ideal goal. Cohen, therefore, places the future Messianic actuality outside the confines of empirical nature or history, but within a process of historical development oriented towards the realisation of a universal Idea. With this Cohen is able to provide a link between religion and theoretical philosophy through their common root in reason. The development of the religion of reason is progressively actualizing a universal conception of mankind in contrast to the development of man as a finite and particular empirical being. The unity and continuity of religion and philosophy is, therefore, found in a shared “infinite task”—the actuality of reason over and against mere sensuous existence. Cohen’s futurually oriented concept of history becomes anchored outside of the contingent and transitory world of mere experience in the process of the realisation of its task.

Cohen’s philosophy, therefore, is not a pre-modern philosophy of absolute experience, but one presupposed on the absence of the Absolute from experience.¹²⁷ Cohen is only able to view experience as fundamentally fragmented and broken. As such, his redemptive conception of the Messianic, just like pure thought, must stand outside and opposed to empirical experience. At this point, it seems that we are left with two possible ways out of the problem of experience. The first is the pre-critical standpoint that makes experience immanently meaningful in its proximity to God. The second, is Cohen’s position that fulfils experience through the substitution of the meaningless and insignificance of the present reality for a fulfilled Messianic conception of a radically new actuality posited in the future. While Cohen claims that his conception of the Messianic remains within the process of historical development, that process of development is seen through the lens of a concept of history oriented towards the development of mankind to

¹²⁶ Ibid., 250.

¹²⁷ See Munk, *Hermann Cohen’s Ethics*: 137. As Deuber-Mankowsky asserts, “Analogously to the pure will, Cohen anchors history, and with it the idea of humanity, in the anticipated eternity of the future, which he interprets, in recourse to Kant, as the idea of eternal peace. The history of humanity is thus revealed as the future-oriented history of eternal progress.”

an ideal “eternal task” separated from any correspondence to empirical reality and actual history. The radical novelty of Cohen’s new actuality rests on a timeless foundation as the realisation of the eternal idea. Thus, Cohen is able to provide a bridge between the eternal and the radically new that separates and protects it from any notion of temporal origin. Cohen, therefore, posits a necessary discontinuity between the absolute and existence that is only overcome in the supplanting of the existing reality for a new actuality founded on the eternal idea.

Cohen’s separation between the idea and existence comes under question in the “Program” essay. In the Supplement to the “Program” essay, Benjamin writes: “the source of existence lies in the totality of experience, and only in teaching does philosophy encounter something absolute, and in so doing encounter that continuity in the nature of experience. The failing of neo-Kantianism can be suspected in its neglect of this continuity.”¹²⁸ In contrast to Garve and Mendelssohn, it is Hamann who Benjamin points to as the figure who attempted to correct the Kantian concept of experience “oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines” in Kant’s lifetime.¹²⁹ Such a reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge could provide a concept of experience that would encompass the areas of religion that Kant was unable to systematize. Such a philosophy, Benjamin states, would “in its universal element... be designated as theology or would be subordinated to theology to the extent that it contains historically philosophical elements.”¹³⁰ Benjamin points towards a conception of the universal that can encompass historical elements, i.e. a conception of the universal that can encompass the particular and the empirical. In his critical treatment of religion, Cohen takes the opposite route: he provides the rational foundation for religion from within his system of philosophy as the expression of a universal and timeless ideal truth.

Cohen forecloses any possibility of a metaphysically expanded concept of experience. He denies the possibility of an immanent continuity between knowledge and existence. Cohen, therefore, juxtaposes two realms of experience—the eternal present of finite and immediate sensuous experience and the paradoxical eternal novelty of an authentic experience posited in the messianic future. This, however, resides on the presupposition of the temporally specific, i.e. a modern, conception of sense experience as

¹²⁸ Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”: 109.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 108.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

something devoid of significance and meaning. The messianic future resides within the domain of universal history; the progressive universal development towards an eternal idea, an idea that remains absolutely discontinuous with the earthly sensuous actuality and activity of human beings.

Cohen's philosophy of religion is modern in a double sense: at its heart is the struggle with the absence of the Absolute or totality, but it does not register this loss in mourning, but as progressive optimism for a future in which both the Absolute idea and a fulfilled mankind will be actualised. As it stands, the existing reality is, in itself, deemed to be without meaning or significance. The world of experience only gains meaning in its supersession, in the imposition of an external form-giving power. The Absolute remains completely outside of experience and must do so in order not to risk being dragged down in the sensuous morass of reality to which only it can provide meaning. The Absolute is radically counterposed to existence, just as pure thought is counterposed to experience. Against Cohen's foreclosure of the Absolute as an object of experience, Benjamin posits the notion of teaching or doctrine as the point at which philosophy encounters the Absolute as existence. This encounter with the Absolute is not, however, the immanent reconciliation of philosophy with the Absolute. That would be the sort of view that Benjamin saw proposed in the possible restoration of a pre-critical concept of experience. Rather, in its encounter with religion, philosophy confronts a "concrete totality of experience".¹³¹ Philosophy, itself conceived as a totality of experience, i.e. the Absolute qua absolute knowledge, finds in religion another form of knowledge that lays claim on the Absolute. Confronted by such an object, philosophy appears to have one of two choices: either leave it unsystematised, as Kant does; or, as Cohen does with his secularised religion of reason, conceive of it as an expression of an eternal and timeless truth.

In subordinating religion to reason, Cohen abstracts the idea of religion from its historical content and temporal/spatial particularity. For Cohen, religion and philosophy become identical in religion becoming a timeless and universal religion of reason. For Cohen, monotheistic religion in its ideal form is and always has been philosophy. In turn, the content of religious doctrine is formed in line with an ideal that transcends the specificity of temporal and territorial origin. The historical specificity and existence of a totality of experience is subordinated to a notion of timeless truth and objective validity, a

¹³¹ Ibid., 109.

phenomenon encountered in both Cohen's theoretical and religious philosophies. The present existence is subordinated to the eternal future in the form of a Messianic idea or a scientific notion of eternal methodological progression. The specificity of religion and its claim on the Absolute is subordinated to its expression of the universal ideal in the form of reason. In doing so, Cohen is able to subordinate religion to philosophy as an expression of the universal idea.

In contrast to Cohen's subordination of religion to philosophical reason, Benjamin's thought is riven by what Caygill describes as an internal tension between material empirical and transcendental idealism. In the latter case, philosophy becomes religion by conceiving of its ideas as timeless and abstract. In the former case, Benjamin suggests "[e]xperience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge."¹³² Knowledge and experience are subjected to the ever-changing flow of temporality. While I agree with Caygill here, I would also raise the issue of Benjamin's invocation of theology contra Cohen's subordination of theology to philosophical reason. Cohen's conception of the religion of reason stands in opposition to Benjamin's understanding of theology as a form of doctrine or teachings. In Cohen's case, the historical specificity and content of theological teachings are irrelevant because theology is conceived merely as an expression of a timeless and universal (not to mention essentially secular) universal idea.

Benjamin's understanding of theology as a historically mediated totality of concrete experience represents an alternative to Cohen's abstract conception of the religion of reason. Benjamin's theology or an accompanying concept of religion would, in contrast, stand in immediate relation to a concrete body of knowledge that contains an immanent relationship to the form of experience underlying it. Nevertheless, this totality of experience would not be reducible to mere experience even though it remains continuous with it. In light of this, Benjamin points towards the possibility of overcoming the tension that characterises the two schools of neo-Kantianism: Cohen's pure logical and genetic idealism, on the one hand, and Rickert's transcendental empiricism, on the other. Caygill points to a tension between material empiricism and a transcendent idealism in Benjamin's thought. This tension is a reflection of the real tension that I located above within the two schools of neo-Kantian philosophy.

¹³² Ibid., 108.

While the solution Benjamin points towards remains a sketchy indication, it gestures towards a conception of knowledge that is not conceived on the basis of timeless and ideal truth. Instead, Benjamin's concept of knowledge is materially oriented without committing the empiricist reduction of knowledge to a mere by-product of experience. Thus, while Benjamin's thought is riven by a tension between a form of empiricism and idealism, that tension is what constitutes Benjamin's unique epistemological perspective in contradistinction to either school of neo-Kantianism. It is this attempt to find a path between material empiricism and transcendent idealism that brings Benjamin close to the form Marxian materialism that I examined in the previous chapter. I will now move onto the fourth and final chapter where I develop Benjamin's materialism in further detail.

4. Materialism in Benjamin's Early Thought

In this chapter I aim to elucidate Benjamin's materialist alternative to the forms of neo-Kantianism that I examined in detail in the previous chapter. Specifically, I demonstrate how Benjamin provides an alternative to both neo-Kantianism and the form of material empiricism that neo-Kantianism decisively refuted. It is my contention that Benjamin's materialism emerges through his engagement with the post-Kantian philosophical tradition, but also comes to transcend that tradition in a number of interesting and novel ways. Benjamin provides the grounds for the critique of a temporally specific form of experience that is not only the private property of the individual, but is also universal and constitutive of the experience of a particular historical epoch.

Benjamin does not strongly dispute Cohen's diagnosis of modern experience as something fundamentally dissonant and fragmented—a reality without form. However, for Benjamin, the fundamental claim of neo-Kantianism—the universal timeless validity of its method—comes into question. The neo-Kantians were fixated on the objective grounding of their epistemological method. If Benjamin is to dispute the ontological separation between the conceptual and the phenomenal or empirical, an alternative to the external application of a method to an object of criticism must be developed. In short, for Benjamin method cannot something that exists completely external to its object of criticism, but, must emerge and remain continuous with that object. The method of criticism would, then, not be eternally valid, but would remain specific to the object it criticises.

The chief problem with examining development of this aspect of Benjamin's thought is that there are few sustained and explicit discussions of method. This too is, perhaps, a necessary outcome of Benjamin's rejection of the neo-Kantian approach: discussions of method cannot take place in the absence of its object. The act of criticism comes to form the grounds of its critique and, therefore, remains inseparable from the object it criticises. In light of this, the difficulty of Benjamin's approach is that it is not developed in an explicitly formal and systematic way, but develops in the margins of his criticism of manifestations of what could be termed the contemporary concept of experience. If Benjamin rejects the neo-Kantian method of epistemological criticism it is necessary to examine how Benjamin conceives of his own method. What differentiates Benjamin's method from neo-Kantianism is his conception of the relationship between the

critic and the object of criticism. Method and object are, in a sense, inseparable and mutually mediating. The method emerges through the engagement with its object, an engagement that, in turn, comes to reflectively form its object of critique.

Benjamin's method is what he refers to as *immanent criticism*. This approach is by no means self-evident. As a result, I will develop an account of it throughout this chapter in relation to particular texts and particular objects of criticism. Benjamin's method of criticism is immanent insofar as it begins from the material and experiential particularity of its object. At the same time, however, it does not remain fixed within the gaze of its object. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter in regards to philosophical concepts, Benjamin aimed to uncover the continuity between transcendent concepts and the empirical reality that these concepts retroactively and abstractly give a form of meaning and significance. It is important to note at this point that conceptual abstraction is not simply an error that can be overcome through recourse to a form of material empiricism. Empiricism can account for material objectivity, but risks viewing the object as complete in specific time and place erasing the element of potentiality that inheres in its object. For its part, speculative idealism risks subordinating the object's particularity to its being as a manifestation of a timeless and universal idea.

Benjamin maintains these two poles in state of tension. His form of criticism does not valorise its object or view it as an expression of a universal quasi-natural law of reason or history. Rather, it aims to uncover an immanent form of potentiality that inheres in the particularity of the object's material and temporal existence. It is not a coincidence that Benjamin turns his attention towards objects that are most clearly imprinted with elements of subjectivity, i.e. artistic and historical objects or events. Judgement on these objects does not take place on the basis of externally established laws or principles, but on the basis of the potentiality that inheres immanently within a particular work. For Benjamin, these objects are irreducible to a set of empirical qualities. Nor, however, are these objects simply a necessary representation or sign of a universal idea or concept. That is to say, that in grasping the particularity of the object, Benjamin aims to demonstrate an immanent potentiality that stands against their singular existence without sacrificing their autonomy to an externalised conception of the Absolute or totality. Thus, for Benjamin and in contrast to the neo-Kantians, both the mode reflective examination of the present actuality and its overcoming must occur immanently within the present, not in a speculatively posited actuality that exists in an ideal and timeless state of contradistinction to the present.

In perceiving of these objects in the full force of their particularity, contingency and potentiality, Benjamin opens up the grounds for a new form of experience that does not merely reconcile the subject to what is, but that points to new potential configurations of experience within the present actuality. Central to this new configuration of experience would be the experience of the Absolute or totality. Benjamin's notion of the Absolute or totality differs significantly from Cohen's purely speculative conception of the Absolute. For the neo-Kantians, the Absolute is counterposed to the world of experience that, by its very nature, lacks form. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Cohen's Messianism rested on the realisation of a new actuality that was radically counterposed to the existing reality. The politics that emerge from Cohen's philosophy could be described as a form of messianic nihilism. For Cohen, the foundation of a new actuality rests on the destruction of the world of experience that is conceived as lacking in-itself any form of inherent significance or meaning. In contrast, in his early work Benjamin aims to locate forms of experience and life in which the Absolute appears immanently within experience, albeit in a disfigured and unrealised state.

Rather than positing a progressive continuity between the present state of existence and a future state of perfection, Benjamin aims to uncover aspects of totality that exist potentially within existing forms of life and experience. These tendencies are obscured from the neo-Kantian perspective that subordinates the particularity of experience to an expression of a universal idea of reason, science, or history. In contrast, Benjamin's uneasy mix of material empiricism and speculative idealism attempts to locate the potentiality of unity, totality or the Absolute immanently within experience. However, Benjamin must first come to redefine his own concept of the Absolute or totality along with providing a mode of criticism capable of capturing that concept.

In order to develop Benjamin's method in detail, this chapter will examine the tension between material empiricism and transcendental idealism that is expressed in Benjamin's epistemological perspective. My claim is that the tension between idealism and empiricism in Benjamin's thought is not simply inconsistent and something to be overcome, nor is it the result of philosophical naiveté. Through accounts of various and seemingly disconnected forms of experience, from cultural objects to the empirical experience of the life of students, Benjamin's method begins to emerge in his early work. I will now move to a discussion of these texts, beginning with two written around the same time: "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin" and "The Life of Students".

4.1 The Poem and Life

Benjamin wrote the essays, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” and “The Life of Students” between the years 1914 and 1915. While they seemingly have little connection thematically, the former is solely dedicated to a literary topic and the latter contains sociological reflections—both of these essays contain reflections on method and, in particular, the notion of a task. For David Ferris, both of these essays contain a “strong sense... of the modern as what demands engagement with a task.”¹ It is, however, important to understand the way in which Benjamin’s conception of a task differs from its treatment in neo-Kantianism. For Cohen, the “infinite task” was the actualisation of reason over and against sensuous existence. While Benjamin shares with Cohen the notion of a task as a limit-concept, he hints at its difference from Cohen’s conception in a 1917 letter to Scholem:

What does it mean to say that science is an eternal task? As soon as you look at it more closely, this sentence is more profound and philosophical than might be believed at first glance. You only had to become clear in your own mind that the subject is an “eternal task” and not a “solution that requires an eternally long time,” and that the first concept in no way can be transformed into the second.²

According to this conception of a task, its power comes precisely from its infinite and speculative character. Cohen’s task, in contrast, contains within it the immanent positing of its solution in tandem with its aim. Both the essay on Hölderlin and the “Life of Students” aim to recover a notion of a task that remains speculative and idealist in character. Benjamin’s essay, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin”, opens with a discussion of what he refers to as *aesthetic commentary* and a discussion of the *poetic task*.

For Benjamin, the poem gains its necessity, its objectivity, and its truth in the fulfilment of this task. The conditions of the poetic task are the subject of the methodological reflections that open this essay. For Benjamin, the poetic task is the

¹ See David S. Ferris, *Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 33. The relationship between these two essays is hinted at in Ferris’ *Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin*. Ferris posits the connection between the notion of “inner-form” that Benjamin ascribes to literary works and the “inner unity” that Benjamin aims to demonstrate is immanently present in the social and spiritual life of students. While I agree with Ferris’ claim that the two essays are related, he, perhaps, too hastily assumes that the aim of the essay on Hölderlin is the development of the task of criticism. Benjamin’s explicit aim in the text is the demonstration of the *poetic task* which, when read in light of “The Life of Students”, could be said to be opposed to the critical task. If the aim of the poetic task is to demonstrate the inner-form of the poem, its totality of meaning, then, as I will show when I discuss “The Life of Students”, it is precisely the form of unity that is lacking in the alienated social and spiritual life of students.

² Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*: 106.

precondition of the poem, it reveals what Benjamin calls “the intellectual-perceptual structure of the world to which the poem bears witness.”³ In order to demonstrate his notion of the poetic task, Benjamin refers to Goethe’s conception of content as inner-form. Goethe developed his conception of inner form in contradistinction to the poetic formalism of classicist aesthetics. For Eudo Mason, inner-form is, for Goethe, as “not really aesthetic, but psychological; he understood by it simply the unifying effect of the poet’s personality upon his work.”⁴ For Mason, the principle of inner form should be understood in line with Goethe’s pronouncement to “plunge into the fullness of human life” in the prologue to *Faust*.⁵ While Benjamin accepts life as the precondition of the poem, he rejects the psychological reading of the notion of inner-form.⁶ In other words, Benjamin follows Goethe’s rejection of aesthetic formalism, but without embracing a form of psychological or empirical realism.

For Benjamin, the poem’s content cannot be reduced to a mere collection of empirical psychological factors that precede its creation. The inner-form of the poem cannot be grasped simply through a distillation of biographical details about the artist’s life or facts about composition of the poem.⁷ Such a conception of the poem would sacrifice its status as a unique and objective sphere of meaning, reducing it to a mere by-product of the poet’s experience. The psychological perspective may appear to be the opposite of aesthetic formalism, but it too must refer to factors external to the poem in order to give an account of the poem’s meaning. More problematically, however, such an account

³ SW1, 18

⁴ Eudo Colecestra Mason, *Goethe’s Faust: Its Genesis and Purport*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1967), 28.

⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy* trans. David Constantine. (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 7.

⁶ In this text and the one that follows, Benjamin is clearly operating on the pre-supposition of a romantic conception of life or *Leben*. Fundamental to this conception of ‘life’ is the unity and totality. As I will show, Benjamin begins to question the possibility of this notion of life in the “Life of Students”, yet it is still treated as the normative foundation of his critique. Benjamin will continue to distance himself from this concept throughout the writings I examine in this chapter, but retains the sense that the modern concept of experience is marked by a loss of totality.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Two Poems by Hölderlin” in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 18. For Benjamin, perceptual content remain irreducible to mere empirical data: “The evaluation cannot be guided by the way the poet has fulfilled his task... Nothing will be said here about the process of lyrical composition, nothing about the person or world view of the creator; rather, the particular and unique sphere in which the task and precondition of the poem lie will be addressed.” Rather than a form of empiricism, here, at least, there is some correspondence with Rickert’s views on concept-formation in history. Thus, Benjamin appears to echo, in the domain of art, the critique of historical realism put forward by Rickert and Simmel that subordinated the particularity of historical events to the universal. While Benjamin does not argue that works of art need to be subordinated to a universal idea of concept of form, he does claim that their perceptual and intellectual content is mediated through his concept of the Poetic.

cannot provide an objective basis for critical reflection since the poem's necessity is only established on the basis of subjective factors external to the work itself.

Against the psychological or empirical reduction, Benjamin refers to Novalis' conception of artistic truth. According to Benjamin, Novalis understands the truth of the poem as the demonstration of its necessity as the realisation of an a priori ideal. Benjamin quotes Novalis: "Every work of art has in and of itself an a priori ideal, a necessity for being in the world."⁸ However, Benjamin does not side with Novalis' conception of artistic truth any more than he accepts the subjective psychological or empirical account. Benjamin distinguishes his conception of the poetic task from both the subjectivism and pure formal idealism. In the former case, the poem becomes identical to life. Its meaning can be captured by reducing its elements to a configuration of empirical or psychological details. In the latter case, the poem transcends its origin in life becoming identical to the idea. Its particularity and its content are dominated in its subordination to an external idea to which it is merely a one of a series of possible manifestations. Rather than valorising the poem's content or form, Benjamin aims to undermine the point of view that separates and externalises form and content into two opposing poles.

In contrast to both the empiricist and formalist conceptions of aesthetic meaning, both of which see the relationship between form and content as an external relation, Benjamin conceives of the poem as an immanent relationship between formal and material elements. The poem generates what Benjamin refers to as its own 'unique sphere' and it is this sphere that must be addressed in critical commentary as something that emerges from the poem, yet also transcends the poem's particularity. The unique sphere that the poem occupies is not, however, devoid of a relationship to the world and to life. As Benjamin claimed above, the poem bears witness to the intellectual and perceptual structure of the world. Its origin is within that structure, but, at the same time, in coming to reflect on its origin it transcends it. The grounds of the poem may be life, but, the poem's existence cannot be reduced to this ground. Although Benjamin does not clearly define the notion of life he uses in this text, it is clear that he is referring to the poem as an autonomous sphere of meaning.

The autonomy of the poem is, therefore, irreducible to the life of the author or artist' While life, or experience, is at the foundation of the poem, Benjamin also claims that the

⁸ Benjamin, "Two Poems by Hölderlin": 19.

poem transcends its origin and takes on a life of its own. Benjamin aims to conserve the poem's objectivity as a unique and individual expression of meaning that transcends the finitude of its origin in the life or experience of the artist. If he were to do otherwise, he would risk falling into the same trap as the commentator that distils the poem's content or its meaning to a mass of subjective psychological or biographical factors.

For Benjamin, the meaning of the poem is not to be established externally through the subordination of the work to a transcendent concept of form nor to external factors such as the biography of the artist. This indicates that through his concept of the Poetic, Benjamin must establish a form of commentary that can offer an immanent account of meaning without sacrificing the objectivity and necessity of the Poetic. Therefore, the Poetic cannot be seen to be identical to the poem. Benjamin defines the Poetic as a limit-concept and a task: "It differs from the poem as a limit-concept, as the concept of a task, not simply through some fundamental characteristics but solely through its greater determinability; not through a quantitative lack of determinations but rather through the potential existence of that that are effectively present in the poem—and others."⁹ The poem exists as a concrete set of determinations, yet the Poetic transcends the concrete particularity of the poem bringing it into a speculative relationship with other possible configurations of meaning.¹⁰ As an individual sphere of meaning the poem is, through the notion of artistic truth, brought reflectively into a continuous relationship with other concrete expressions of this truth (other poems) and a horizon of other potential configurations.

Benjamin's concept of the Poetic understands the poem as a sphere from which the necessary immanent connection of form and content in the work can be examined critically. In light of this, Benjamin rejects both the empiricist mode of criticism that reduces the grounds of criticism to a collection of empirical historical or biographical details and an idealist form of criticism that locates the poem's necessity in its correspondence to a transcendent idea. Therefore, it is here we find the double-nature of Benjamin's conception of aesthetic commentary in this text: on the one hand, the poem is conceived of as existing as a singular creation with its own inner-form while, on the other

⁹ Benjamin, "Two Poems by Hölderlin"; 19.

¹⁰ Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*: 37. As Caygill states, "In order to criticise the particular configuration employed in the actual poem it is necessary to speculate upon the other possible configurations of 'the Poetic'."

hand, it exists in continuity with other works defined by a speculative conception of the Poetic.¹¹ Benjamin's conception of the Poetic must be able to account for both the immanent objective meaning of individual poem's particular configuration while also providing the grounds of speculation on possible alternative configurations. In other words, aesthetic commentary must be able to account for why this particular poem takes on one possible configuration among other potential configurations.

After developing his conception of the Poetic, Benjamin moves onto an examination of how the unity of 'life' that lies at the foundation of the Poetic. In doing so, he establishes an implicit link between his concept of the Poetic and experience. The relationship between the poem and life is not immediately obvious. Benjamin points towards this with his formulation of the Poetic as "the synthetic unity of the intellectual and perceptual orders". Central to Benjamin's concept of the Poetic is its nature as a limit-concept or, put more precisely, as a limit between two concepts—the poem and life. As Benjamin states, "the Poetic emerges as the transition from the functional unity of life to that of the poem. In the Poetic, life determines itself through the poem, the task through the solution."¹²

The view that life qua experience is at the centre of the poem appears to contradict Benjamin's insistence that his conception of aesthetic commentary does not take into account biographical factors external to the poem. Although Benjamin states, echoing Goethe's conception of inner-form in which life, described as the "ultimate unity", lays at the basis of the Poetic he also maintains that the unity of life and the unity of the work of art are wholly "ungraspable".¹³ The unity of life in its totality remains ungraspable from the point of view of art. Only a completely ideal artwork could achieve such a task. So, while the necessity of Goethe's maxim that the poem "plunge into the fullness of life" is valid, it

¹¹ See Ibid., 37 and Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to his Work and Thought* trans. Michael Winkler. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 33. Both Caygill and Uwe Steiner recognise the concept of the poetic as one of the foundations of Benjamin's later method of immanent criticism. However, Steiner puts too much stress on the empirical aspect of Benjamin's notion of the poetic: "Criticism, consequently, amounts less to a judgement *on* rather to a description *of* the work of art." Steiner misses the speculative aspect of Benjamin's concept of criticism that is so well developed in Caygill's account. As Caygill states, "the 'Poetic'... has the speculative property of constituting both this actual *and* one of a number of other configurations of intuitive and spiritual orders... In order to criticise the particular configuration employed in an actual poem it is necessary to speculate upon the other possible configurations of 'the Poetic'." As I said in the introduction to this chapter, grasping the double-nature of Benjamin's form of critique as both empirical/descriptive and speculative/intellectual is fundamental for grasping the nature of his concept of criticism.

¹² Benjamin, "Two Poems by Hölderlin": 19-20. [Translation modified]

¹³ Ibid., 20.

is also the limit of the artwork. An artwork that could fulfil that task and grasp life in its totality would be a purely ideal one. As David Ferris suggests, “a poem must be content with the relation to life it presents – precisely because no other relation is possible for it when the ideal is ungraspable. Since its ideal is the ungraspable, the poem belongs to life.”¹⁴ The life that determines the poem, as Benjamin states, “is not the individual life-mood of the artist but rather a life-context determined by art.”¹⁵

Benjamin is able to account for the necessity of the individual work as the expression of the life of the artist without reducing it to a set of empirical facts. Further, the Poetic represents a sphere in which the ungraspable unities of life and the artwork relate without collapsing into one another. Benjamin asserts that a pure concept of the Poetic must remain external to criticism: “The disclosure of the pure Poetic, the absolute task, must remain—after all that has been said—a purely methodological, ideal goal.”¹⁶ If the poem were to successfully fulfil its task, its necessity for being in the world would be destroyed. Thus, the artistic task—the realisation of the pure Poetic—remains external to the poem as a regulative principle or limit-concept. If aesthetic commentary were to achieve its task and reach the pure Poetic, “it would otherwise cease to be a limit-concept: it would be life or poem.”¹⁷ Or, in other words, the Poetic’s role as a limit-concept would be destroyed and life would either be subordinated to poem or the poem subordinated to life.

As a limit concept, the Poetic provides the sphere in which the poem can be determined by life and life by the poem without becoming reducible to either pole. On the one hand, if the poem were to be subordinated to life, it would be reduced to a conception of poetic meaning as a mere collection of empirical biographical or psychological facts. On the other hand, if life were to be totally subordinated to the poem, the poem would be absolved of any relationship to experience, it would become an idea totally separated from its empirical origin. In this case, poetic meaning could only be achieved by subordinating the particularity of the poem to a conception of ideal meaning totally external to the poem’s concrete particularity. As Benjamin states, in the Poetic there occurs a synthesis of the intellectual and perceptual aspects of the poem without one side becoming subordinate

¹⁴ Ferris, *Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin*: 35.

¹⁵ Benjamin, “Two Poems by Hölderlin”: 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

to the other. The material is formed by the idea while the idea emerges from the material; they are mutually mediating without one side being reducible to the other. In this way we can say that the poem is formed by life, but, at the same time, it points beyond the finite horizon of that formation. The singular work does not exhaust the possible configurations of life, just as life does not exhaust the horizon of possible configurations of the work. The Poetic points to an inner-unity between life and art that is beyond both the life of the individual and any particular work, a totality that is and must be absent so long as art is deemed to be necessary.

How are we to understand the notion of the task that emerges in this early essay? For Ferris, Benjamin relies on the positing of an unquestionable metaphysical ideal, an approach he will later come to reject. What is characteristic of Benjamin's thought is not the rejection of metaphysics or even a concept of form *tout court*. The significance of Benjamin's speculative conception of the Poetic is that it maintains the poem's relationship to life while, at the same time, maintaining it as an objective configuration of experience. The individual poem is an object of experience that is itself formed from the material of life. It is, however, not merely accidental or arbitrary. Rather, Benjamin's speculative concept of the Poetic can account for both the meaning of a particular work while also establishing that work's objectivity in relationship to other works of art. Benjamin's account of aesthetic meaning, therefore, does not conceive of the artwork in an ideal way as something that completely transcends life and experience, nor does it succumb to the formless tendency to see the work as a mere by-product of the experience of the artist. Rather, by remaining squarely within the world of experience, yet also speculatively transcending that world, the poem points to new possible horizons and configurations of experience within the world of experience itself.¹⁸ As limit-concept, the Poetic provides the sphere in which the speculative and material aspects of the poem can co-exist without collapsing into one another: a sphere of distinction without subordination. I will now move on to a discussion of "The Life of Students" where Benjamin examines the notion of a task in a more materialist way in relation to a concrete form of experience.

¹⁸ See Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*: 40.

4.2 The Life of Students

At first glance, the content of Benjamin's essay, "The Life of Students", appears as a polemic that emerges from his experience in the German Youth Movement and his dissatisfaction with the state of the German university. What interest lies in these seemingly anachronistic and isolated reflections? What I find so fascinating about this text is the manner in which Benjamin posits a number of dichotomies that will occur again and again in his writings. Further, in this text, Benjamin begins to develop the method of criticism that will characterise his later thought. While this text beginning from a descriptive account of a fragmented and dissonant form of experience, Benjamin attempts to uncover elements within that experience that point beyond its fragmentation to an essential unity. These universal elements have been suppressed intellectually by the fragmentary natural sciences and the practical vocational disciplines. In light of this, it is possible to note two chief dichotomies that preoccupy Benjamin in this text: on the one hand, the relationship between the intellectual and the practical, and, on the other, the material and the spiritual life of students. Benjamin's reflections on the state of the German university and his discussion of the relationship between youth and adulthood coincide with reflections on the concept of progress and history, criticism and the instrumentalisation of knowledge. Read in light of the philosophical texts that follow, this text appears to express materially some of those epistemological problems that Benjamin engages with later on.

Benjamin begins the text by sketching a theory of progress that could be said to underline not only Cohen and Rickert's neo-Kantian philosophies, but post-Kantian idealism in general: "There is a view of history that puts its faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the path of progress."¹⁹ For Benjamin, Kantian and neo-Kantian idealism is characterised by the notion of an infinite task and its aim is the realisation of the idea. An idea, however, that cannot be present in being or existence, but must lie outside of reality in the form of a limit-concept. As we saw with Cohen, this took the form of the Messianic in his philosophical theology and the 'fact of science' in his scientific idealism. Against an externalised conception of the idea, Benjamin posits a position that is able to capture a state of "immanent perfection" and, in turn, makes that idea absolute "visible and

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Life of Students" in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 37.

dominant in the present”.²⁰ Echoing his critique of the empiricist reduction in the previous section, Benjamin proposes that the historical task is not to simply grasp history in terms of individual details, but “its metaphysical structure”.²¹

What is immediately striking about Benjamin’s formulation of the historical task in this text is its potential correspondence with Rickert’s conception of history. Like Rickert and Simmel, Benjamin opposes the realist conception of history that attempts to capture historical events pragmatically through the description of particular details. If criticism is to be more than just polemical or descriptive, it must abstract from the particular and demonstrate the universal tendencies within a particular historical moment. Only in conceptualizing the present can criticism demonstrate those tendencies that must be interrupted.

In the opening of the text, Benjamin brings together what he calls the *task of history* and the *task of criticism*. For Benjamin, the life of students represents what he calls an image or metaphor of the present state of dissonance. The task to history is to grasp the metaphysical structure of the present in relation to the past; the task of criticism is to change it by liberating “the future from its deformations in the present by an act of cognition.”²² Again we find a potential point of correspondence with neo-Kantianism, this time with Hermann Cohen’s logical idealism which views the present, the world of experience, as something lacking form. In this text, Benjamin agrees with Cohen’s diagnosis of reality to a certain extent: he views experience—the life of students—as fundamentally fragmented and dissonant. However, unlike Cohen he does not view this form of experience as something that must be overcome externally, in its subordination to a transcendent concept. Rather, criticism provides the means by which the form of the present existence can be recognised. It is through critical recognition that the fragmented and dissonant form of experience that dominates in the present can be overcome immanently. For Benjamin, the present must be exposed to criticism. A form of criticism, moreover, that can capture both the historical form of the present and its immanent experiential content.

The critique of the present is only possible by grasping what Benjamin describes as its own innermost metaphysical structure. This structure is expressed speculatively in the

²⁰ Benjamin, “The Life of Students”: 37.

²¹ Ibid., 37.

²² Ibid., 38.

dominant ideas of a particular historical epoch. It is also, however, expressed in the concrete experience of student life, a life in which the dominant speculative idea finds its concrete form of expression. In light of this, the university has a double significance: first, it represents a particular domain of experience that Benjamin was intimately familiar with at the time; and, secondly, the university can be seen as the sphere in which the dominant theory of knowledge is institutionally conveyed. The university, as an institution, reflects the ideas that dominate a particular historical epoch. At the particular historical juncture when Benjamin was writing this text, the dominant philosophy in the German universities was academic neo-Kantianism. As such, the critique of the life of students can be seen, at least in part, as the sociological counterpart to Benjamin's theoretical critique of academic neo-Kantianism discussed in the previous chapter. For Benjamin, it is in the life of students that we find the dissonant nature of modern life laid bare, a fact barely covered up in the impoverished intellectual and social lives of students.

The method of criticism Benjamin makes use of in this text shares its immanent tendency with the mode of aesthetic commentary he developed in the essay on Hölderlin. In the "Life of Students", Benjamin locates a deep crisis that finds its form of appearance in the university and the experience of individuals whose lives are structured by that institution. Benjamin examines a form of life lacking that lacks inner-unity found in the concept of the Poetic that he develops in the essay on Hölderlin. The life of students is dissonant and fragmented precisely because it has been alienated from its creative capacity. Its will has been externalised, totally subordinated to the practical demands of the state and the abstract demands of adulthood.²³ For Benjamin, student life, in contrast to either the life of the pragmatic bureaucrat or the adult, is characterised by the drive to submit oneself to a principle, to identify oneself completely with an idea. Benjamin, however, notes a contradiction in the idea that structures the university life in the period he was writing. Specifically, that a university oriented around vocational training requires a separation of knowledge into various disciplines and, further, a separation between the intellectual sphere

²³ See Ibid., 33. With this Benjamin picks up on themes that exist in his earliest reflections on the experience of youth. In short essay written in 1913 for the student journal *Der Anfang*, Benjamin writes: "More and more we are assailed by the feeling: our youth is but a brief night (fill it with rapture!); it will be followed by grand 'experience', the years of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and lack of energy. Such is life. That is what adults tell us, and that is what they experienced." The Nietzschean overtones in this text become muted by the time Benjamin writes "The Life of Students". However, the notion that the experience of youth is rendered impotent to the demands of the experience of adulthood remains central to Benjamin's thought at this point.

of academic scholarship and practical sphere of vocational training. At the basis of the life of students is a separation between the spiritual and material that manifests itself in a fragmented and dissonant form of social life. At the centre of this text is form of life lacking the unifying power of a creative spirit in full possession of its Will. For Benjamin, the intuition of the university has indeed been subordinated to an 'idea', specifically the concept of *Wissenschaft*. However, rather than providing a form unity, the 'practical idea' of science that lies at the basis of student life is essentially fragmentary.

The practical idea of vocation or professional training lies at the foundation of the university, in contrast to a traditional idea of learning. In contrast to learning, the conception of education as vocation, Benjamin states, "serves primarily to conceal a deep-rooted, bourgeois indifference."²⁴ As a result of the separation of professionalised vocation from a concept of learning, academic scholarship is seen to have no bearing on life. As such, scholarship paradoxically becomes the sole determinant of the lives of those who pursue it; the life of academic scholarship can only be pursued in abstraction from the practical vocational life. Here, Benjamin appears to play with the autonomy that Kant grants the lower philosophical faculty in his text *The Conflict of the Faculties*. In that text, Kant makes an explicit claim for the autonomy of the university from the state and the lower philosophical faculty from the higher professional faculties. For Kant, it was paramount that the university have a lower faculty that was independent of the state: "one that, having no commands to give, is free to evaluate everything, and concerns itself with the interests of the sciences, that is, with truth: one in which reason is authorised to speak out publicly."²⁵ The demand that philosophy form the critical foundation onto which the other faculties stand can be seen as central to the neo-Kantian conception of critical philosophy, in particular, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Cohen's critical idealism. However, for Benjamin, this conception of philosophy has been perverted. While the lower faculties have retained a level of intellectual autonomy they have, at the same time, have only been able to guarantee it by acquiescing to the practical demand of the state to produce well-trained professionals.

Merely pointing to the collusion between the state and the university misses what Benjamin calls the "huge gulf between ideas and life". The autonomy of academic scholarship has come at a cost: the gulf between ideas and life. Benjamin does not wish to

²⁴ Ibid., 38.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* trans. Mary J. Gregor. (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), 29.

merely repeat Kant's claim for autonomy of the university and the fundamental unity of knowledge in the lower faculty. Rather, a subtle dialectic of heteronomy and autonomy can be detected in this text. On one side, stand the professional disciplines that are totally subordinated to the demands of the state. On the other side, lies the apparently free intellectual pursuit of academic scholarship that has developed autonomously from vocational training. Put simply, Benjamin locates a separation between an instrumentalised form of vocational training and an autonomous but rather impotent form of academic scholarship at the centre of the university. As Benjamin states, for most students the aim of a university education is vocational, to obtain a profession. The promise of academic freedom, Benjamin states, is accompanied by the instrumental assumption that "the aim of study is to steer its disciples to a socially conceived individuality and service to the state."²⁶

For Benjamin, the complicity of the university with the state is characteristic of the form of academic neo-Kantianism I examined in the previous chapter. He makes this charge explicitly in his 1939 review of the neo-Kantian Richard Höningwald's *Philosophie und Sprache*: "[T]he more energetically these disciplines vied with the rigor of the exact sciences, the more promptly and discreetly they could comply with official demands, using the over-meticulous study of sources as their alibi."²⁷ Paradoxically, for Benjamin, the more autonomous and independent from reality neo-Kantianism could claim to be, the more it immersed itself in its own apparently autonomous intellectual effort, the more it becomes complicit with the state. For Benjamin, the idea of academic scholarship as autonomous and the philosophical faculty as an independent seat of learning has been rendered anachronistic; the state is the guarantor of academic freedom, but only insofar as that freedom serves the state in the form of its reproduction through vocational training.

Benjamin's object of criticism in "The Life of Students" is what he refers to as the "conscious unity of student life" or, in other words, its own self-understanding. For Benjamin, student life is no longer animated by the pursuit of knowledge, but the pursuit of a profession. That characteristic Benjamin locates at the heart of the life of students—the willingness to submit oneself to an idea—has not been rendered insignificant, it just so happens that the institution of the university is no longer founded on the principle of learning, but that of vocation. It is at this point that Benjamin's method of criticism in this text becomes the most interesting. Students in their present form of existence, Benjamin

²⁶ Benjamin, "The Life of Students": 38.

²⁷ Benjamin, "Review of Richard Höningwald's *Philosophie und Sprache*", 140.

states, “can be understood as a metaphor, as an image of the highest metaphysical state of history.”²⁸ The life of students casts light on a deeper crisis which has “hitherto... lain buried in the nature of things.”²⁹

In light of this conception of the crisis, Benjamin aims to grasp what he refers to as the *inner unity* or, earlier, the conscious unity of student life. As Benjamin asserts, grasping the inner unity differs from “critique from outside.”³⁰ In beginning from the conscious unity of student life, Benjamin begins from the immanent experience of university life, an experience that is underlined by a distorted notion of *Wissenschaft* and vocational training. The traditional opposition between the demand for intellectual autonomy on behalf of the university and compliance with the demands of the state has, in Benjamin’s time, been resolved into an external unity between the university and the state. In other words, the ideal conception of the university as an independent space for critical discourse has been rendered anachronistic. In its place, the university retains its intellectual autonomy in exchange for the production of a well-trained citizenry capable of coping with the demands of public life.

What is important for Benjamin is not the comparison with the contemporary university with some external ideal, but the recognition that for the vast majority of students “academic study is nothing more than vocational training.”³¹ In a similar fashion, Benjamin goes on to demonstrate that the traditional opposition between youth and adulthood has been turned into a complicity with youth to the demands of adulthood in, for example, the acquiescence of youth to the institution of marriage or the demand for a profession.³² The totality of the state, that external unity which confronts the individual as all-pervasive, so much so that it has rendered its traditional opponent—the autonomous community of learning—impotent, serves to mask a deeper spiritual disunity that Benjamin sees as characteristic of the current historical juncture.

The inner spiritual unity of the student community has given way to an external unity between the university and the state, on the one side, and youth and adulthood, on the other. The autonomy of youth from the demands of adulthood is won on a similar ground as that of the autonomy of academic scholarship from the state. Both gain their autonomy

²⁸ Benjamin, “The Life of Students”: 37.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 43.

through the promise of their eventual subordination. The re-functioning of the university as an institution for vocational training is, however, merely the surface appearance of what Benjamin views as a deeper spiritual crisis. At this point, it is possible to isolate two levels of the text. At the surface level, the text confronts the reader as a polemical critique of a form of philistinism that has taken hold of university life. As Benjamin remarks: “The perversion of the creative spirit into the vocational spirit, which we see at work everywhere, has taken possession of the universities as a whole and has isolated them from the nonofficial, creative life of the mind.”³³ Of course, this is an aspect of the life of students that Benjamin is criticizing, but this aspect alone does not exhaust Benjamin’s aim. At a deeper level, Benjamin is engaging with critique of the present historical juncture to which the life of students provides an image.

In this regard, Benjamin appears to draw on Georg Simmel’s diagnosis of modernity.³⁴ Benjamin builds on the separation Simmel saw at the heart of modernity between the *subjective culture* of individuals and the *objective culture* of society. As Simmel writes in his 1908 text *On the Essence of Culture*,

Thus far at least, historical development has moved towards a steadily increasing separation between objective cultural production and the cultural level of the individual. The dissonance of modern life... is caused in large part by the fact that things are becoming more and more cultivated, while men are less able to gain from the perfection of objects a perfection of the subjective life.³⁵

For Simmel, here echoing the young Marx’s conception of alienation, the more social complexity increases—specifically the more complex the division of labour becomes—the more culture takes on the appearance of an objective realm governed by its own internal logic transcending the concrete life of the individual. In a similar fashion, Benjamin aims to demonstrate how the creative community of students has been distorted and fragmented into a professionalised collection of individuals for whom student life has been rendered into a mere stop on the inevitable path to profession and adulthood.³⁶ This situation is one

³³ Ibid., 41-2.

³⁴ Between 1912 and 1915, the period in which this text was written, Benjamin attended Simmel’s lectures in Berlin.

³⁵ Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms* trans. Donald N. Levine. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 234. For Simmel, there must be objective culture for subjective culture to be possible in the first place. However, what defines the autonomous realm of objective culture particular to modernity is that cultural objects that have been created are not and cannot, due to the nature of the division of labour, be fully utilised by the subject. Thus, the huge increases in technical and cultural progress only lead to more dissonance and dissatisfaction since this progress appears to occur externally to and automatically of the subjective life of the individual.

³⁶ Benjamin, “The Life of Students”: 46.

in which the creative potential of the community has been subordinated to an isolated and mechanised conception of the individual.

Benjamin locates the fragmentation of the unified spirit in a division that mirrors the separation of the intellectual and the vocational in the university. On the one hand, there is the “autonomous intellect” of the student fraternities and, on the other hand, “an unmastered force of nature” in the neutralised and commodified eroticism of prostitution around the university.³⁷ It is this spiritual disunity that is to blame for the fact that “the students of today as a community are incapable of even formulating the issue of the role of learning, or grasping its indissoluble protest against the vocational demands of the age.”³⁸ Again, Benjamin locates a distinction between the intellectual and the material at the heart of the problem. Moreover, Benjamin points to a unity of knowledge and experience in a community of creative human beings; a unity expressed in the universality of philosophy over the individual sciences. This essential unity must be renewed through the creation of a community oriented around what Benjamin refers to as a notion of “expansive friendship”. This true universal community could counter the instrumentalised and fragmented form of knowledge that dominates the university.³⁹ Thus, Benjamin puts forwards a holistic conception of a creative community of friends which has no place in a university that values only individual achievement.⁴⁰ What underlies Benjamin’s rather pointed critique of the life of students, as an image for the fragmentation and distortions of modernity, is the yearning for a holistic unity of knowledge and experience. The unity that Benjamin yearns for can only be achieved through the actualisation of a creative community based on an expansive conception of friendship. This community would overcome the fragmentation and dissonance that occurs in the absence of the creative spirit.

Benjamin’s conception of the creative community appears to echo Cohen’s claim, which echoed Kant’s conception of the philosophical faculty, that philosophy represents the universal foundation of knowledge: “The community of creative human beings elevates

³⁷ Ibid., 44.

³⁸ Ibid., 39.

³⁹ Benjamin’s conception of a community based on a notion of expansive friendship would be more inclusive than existing one characterised by the prevalence of exclusively male fraternities.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 46. Benjamin describes his notion of expansive friendship: “That expansive friendship between creative minds, with its sense of infinity and its concern for humanity as a whole when those minds are alone together or when they experience yearning in solitude.” Such a community is, perhaps, modelled on the *Sprachsaal* Benjamin himself set up in Berlin in 1913. Benjamin conceived of the *Sprachsaal* as a community composed of points of view that were politically non-synthesisable. Such a community would not only embody the potential extreme of youth, but also its receptivity and expressive spontaneity.

every field of study to the universal through the form of philosophy.”⁴¹ Benjamin’s belief in the universality of philosophy and the creative community exposes the implicit tension in the text between philosophy and science, something that we find again in the “Program” essay. Benjamin conceives of the sciences as fragmented and narrowly empirical while philosophy contains an inherent universalizing and unifying tendency that is mirrored in Benjamin’s conception of the creative community. In other words, the absence of unity Benjamin locates in university life is mirrored in the domination of the universal science—philosophy—by the fragmentary and narrowly empirical natural sciences.

In this light, Benjamin quotes an address he made to an audience of students: “The totality of will [*das Wollenden*] could not find any expression, because in that community its will could not be directed towards the totality.”⁴² In their acquiescence to the demand to demonstrate their utility to the state, students have merely re-enacted “in microcosm... that same conflict that we have noted in the relationship of the university to the state.”⁴³ Thus, Benjamin lays claim to an inner-unity that has been fragmented by the subordination of the Will to an external power that stands over and above both the individual and the community. Benjamin demands a reconstitution of a conception of youth that is underlined by a creative spirit in full possession of its Will. This alienated Will does not exist external to reality as something that must be imposed on experience and existence, but, in some sense, is located within the experience of youth in a displaced form. The displaced form of expression of this Will is expressed, for Benjamin, in individualism characteristic of the vocational fraternities and the false eroticism of prostitution.

The Will, in its present form, lacks force because it lacks a unified form of expression. As such, it can only express itself in a finite and limited way. Yearning for an absent of totality and the diagnosis of a fragmented and dissonant reality point to idealist and Romantic motifs operating throughout this text. His Romanticism is, however, tempered by a conviction that the solution to the problem does not lie in a lost totality, but in the realisation of a new formation of life that can be grasped within the disfigurement of the present. That said, however, it is also clear that in his solution Benjamin does not escape the charge of idealism. However, it is important to recognise the materialist implications within the mode of criticism Benjamin employs in this text, even if he

⁴¹ Ibid., 42.

⁴² Ibid., 41.

⁴³ Ibid.

ultimately falls back onto idealist tropes when it comes to his solution to the fragmentation and dissonance he perceives at the heart of modern life.

The concept of criticism that Benjamin develops in this text appears to double-aim: first to recognise the disfigured state of the present; and, second, through this process of critical recognition posit its overcoming. However, it is here that we can identify a tension between the text's materialist and idealist elements. The critical diagnosis of reality as fundamentally alienated appears at odds with Benjamin's speculative positing of the immanent overcoming of that alienation through the process of its critique. On the one hand, we can see that Benjamin's critique finds its starting point in the actuality of the present rather than in a transcendent idea. Thus, he avoids the neo-Kantian messianism of Cohen for whom the present reality was something that had to be subordinated to an external idea. Rather than subordinating life to an external idea, Benjamin aims to provide the means by which a new form of life could be actualised within the present. As he states in the closing sentence of the essay: "Er wird das Künftige aus seiner verbildeten Form im Gegenwärtigen erkennend befreien"⁴⁴ Through recognition the coming age can be liberated from the disfigured form [*verbildeten Form*] of the present. The implication of this sentence is that the form of the present, which was the critical task of this essay to grasp, is judged as disfigured.

Following from this conclusion, we can grasp Benjamin's objection to the concept of progress more clearly: rather than deepening the disfigurement of the present, Benjamin aims to critically re-cognise those elements in the present actuality that provide the ground for its immanent overcoming. In grasping the form of the present, Benjamin marks the crisis in the life of students as "a particular condition in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have been found in the utopian images of the philosophers."⁴⁵ Following from this, Benjamin conceives of the historical task as the recognition of those elements that appear "embedded in every present moment as the most vulnerable, defamed, ridiculed creations and thoughts. To shape the immanent state of perfection clearly as absolute, to make it visible and dominant in the present."⁴⁶ Beneath the lack of totality, dissonance and fragmentation of the modern world lies an inner-unity

⁴⁴ Ibid., 46. In contrast to the rendering of *verbildeten Form* as "deformed" in the English translation of this text in the *Selected Works*, I have rendered it as disfigured in order to avoid confusion with Benjamin's use of *Einstellung*.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

or what Benjamin calls an “immanent state of perfection” from which the present actuality and the experience of individuals have become estranged.

It is clear that Benjamin’s mode of criticism aims to disclose and overcome the gap between the disfigured shape of reality and an immanent state of perfection. Critical recognition aims at exposing those elements within the disfigured reality that exceed it; forms of life and experience such as the creativity and spontaneity of youth represents such points for Benjamin. Elements that contradict the fragmented and dissonant nature of modern life—expansive friendship, eros, and so on—are suppressed and excluded, yet come to appear in a disfigured form in the margins of student life, i.e. within the fraternities and prostitution. The disfigured reality can be overcome, or better yet redeemed, through the making present of the form of totality that Benjamin views as absent from experience. It is here that the tension between materialism and idealism in this text can be seen most clearly.

Within the image of the present that Benjamin constructs there are elements that exceed it and, in doing so, point towards the grounds of a new configuration of life within the actuality of the present. However, at the same time, Benjamin rejects the possibility of perfecting the present actuality; it is disfigured and dissonant and any further movement along the path of progress would merely deepen this situation. Thus, while Benjamin recognises a state of immanent perfection, the final state or the absolute must be totally discontinuous with the actual disunity and disfigurement of the present. It would seem, therefore, that a tension persists in Benjamin’s mode of criticism between a materialism that traces the potential for a new configuration of life within the present actuality and an idealism that rejects the present in the name of an idealised totality.

Benjamin’s mode of criticism seems to resist this idealisation, holding onto the particularity of student life as a manifestation of those forces that have been rejected or rendered outmoded in the present reality. Therefore, despite the idealism inherent in Benjamin’s solution, the way in which he develops his object and method of criticism remains significant. First, he applies his method of criticism to a historically existing social phenomenon, moreover a social phenomenon that he sees as the embodiment of a deeper spiritual crisis. Second, we see him turning his eye to the problematic separation between the material and the conceptual, something that will be developed in more theoretical detail in the texts I examined in the previous chapter, within the particular experience of youth. Finally, Benjamin’s development of a form of criticism that is immanent to its object in contrast to descriptive or polemical criticism is an important development for his method

of immanent criticism. By locating the overcoming of the disunity of experience immanently within the existing reality Benjamin distinguishes himself from the neo-Kantianism of Cohen, even though his solution remain idealist in its orientation. Although Benjamin conceives of this overcoming in terms of an idealist conception of totality, he points to a conception of totality that exists potentially within the present actuality.

Through criticism, Benjamin aims to make this idea manifest thus interrupting the ‘formless progressive tendencies’ characteristic of the Kantian and neo-Kantian conception of history. In doing so, rather than perpetuating the disfigurement of reality over time, criticism aims to expose an immanent state of perfection within the present actuality thus interrupting a form of empty progress that exacerbates rather than overcomes the real state of disfigurement, dissonance and fragmentation. However, Benjamin ultimately falls back into an idealist trope when he transforms the concrete absence of totality he recognises in the experience of student life into an abstract and redemptive idea. Despite the fact that he attempts to derive this totality immanently from the present actuality, the logic of his diagnosis requires that he must also posit discontinuity between the disfigured present and a redeemed future. While it appears that he draws his idea immanently from the present actuality, such an approach would also violate his rejection of the possible perfection of the present. Thus, there remains an unresolved tension between his materialist form of criticism and the demand that criticism transforms or redeems reality in line with an idea that is and must be absent from reality and experience.

In conclusion, it is quite clear that Benjamin convincingly traces the absence of totality within the concrete experience of the life of students. He is able to construct an idea of the present that captures the immanent tendencies of this form of life and lays bare its state of disfigurement. This form of criticism isolates the form of the present, examining its warps and fissures in order to get a better understanding of its singular nature. However, despite tracing the ground for the overcoming of this reality immanently, the resolution of the split between the real state of disfigurement and the ideal totality and unity has not taken place. There remains a strong tension between the idealist and quasi-Romantic state of ideal perfection that Benjamin posits in this text and the real state of disfigurement and disunity he identifies as the fundamental configuration of modern life.

Within this text it is possible to locate some crucial elements that will underline the theoretical texts that follow. These are made manifest in the conception of politics that Benjamin puts forward. Benjamin’s view of politics in the “Life of Students” is one that

rejects both a revolutionary “call for arms” and a reformist “manifesto”.⁴⁷ Both reform and revolution require a unity and subordination of the Will that would result in the subordination of the particular to an external and universal political demand. Against a politics that demands the subordination of the particular to the universal (youth to adulthood and, in the case of Benjamin’s former mentor and leader of the Youth Movement, Gustav Weyneken, the subordination of the individual to the unifying ethical idea of the German state made manifest by the First World War), Benjamin appears to point towards a notion of politics in which the idea emerges spontaneously from the irreducible affinity of a group of particular Wills. Such a conception of politics would require the expression of the particular Will without the particular becoming subordinated to the universal in the form of a concretely existing state or ideology. This form of politics is characterised by an essential element of resistance. Perhaps this conception of politics is the reason that Benjamin’s conception of totality is so unconvincing in the text: as it appears in the text, Benjamin’s conception of totality is ideally presupposed in contradistinction to the actuality of the life of students.

At this point, I will move onto the text “On Language as Such and the Language of Man”. This text can be seen as a bridge between these early texts and those I examined in the previous chapter. It will become clear that Benjamin builds on many of the themes in these early texts while refining his object of criticism. In particular, Benjamin is attempting to reconceptualise a notion of totality and the Absolute that can accommodate a fundamental element of resistance to the subordination of the individual. This notion of totality emerges more clearly in the texts that follow, albeit in a more theoretical and less immediately empirical guise. It is essential to demonstrate the thematic continuity contained within these early texts, specifically in relation to Benjamin’s conception of totality or the Absolute and its relationship to his method of criticism. Here, Benjamin continues to refine his notion of criticism and his conception of totality while abandoning some of the Romantic and idealist tropes that clearly mark “The Life of Students”.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 37.

4.3 Hamann and the Metacritique of Kantian Philosophy

In this section I look at Benjamin's text "On Language" written between the early texts that I examined in the previous section and the critique of neo-Kantianism that I detailed in the previous chapter. This is an extremely difficult text with an elusive object of criticism. In light of this, I restrict my examination in order to bring out two crucial elements. First, I demonstrate the underlying critique of Kantian epistemology in this text. I do so by bringing out the influence of Hamann on Benjamin during this period, in particular the influence of Hamann's text *The Metacritique of the Purism of Reason*. Second, develop these themes in order to demonstrate how they resonate with the critique Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy that Benjamin put forward in the "Program" essay. The Hamannian elements of this text reveal a problematic in regards to the post-Kantian conception of the subject-object relationship, in particular the loss of meaning and significance of the object world that Benjamin sees as characteristic of modernity.

The problematic, which Benjamin here locates in the realm of language, will become, as we saw in the "Program" essay, characteristic of Benjamin's view of modernity more generally. Further, through his conception of language, Hamann pointed towards continuity between sensibility and the intellect within language. Such a conception of language provides one possible model of continuity between knowledge and experience. Before dealing with Benjamin's problematic I will outline Hamann's critique of Kant, a critique that informs and underlines Benjamin's view of what he calls the 'bourgeois' conception of language. This will help elucidate the grounds of Benjamin's own difficult conception of language and its relationship to Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy.

What does Hamann mean by the term *metacritique*? Simply put, Hamann wishes to place Kant's critical philosophy under the same critical scrutiny to which Kant submitted all forms of philosophical reflection. In other words, Hamann's text remains in the tradition of Kantian critical philosophy while, at the same time, going beyond it by submitting the chief Kantian presupposition of—the concept of pure reason—to criticism. If, as Kant states, "[o]ur age is the age of criticism, to which everything must submit", then it is necessary to submit Kant's own philosophy, including the presupposition of the sovereignty of reason, to criticism.⁴⁸ It is possible to say, therefore, that Hamann's

⁴⁸ CPR A, IX.

Metacritique provided part of the groundwork for what is understood as post-Kantian philosophy.⁴⁹

Hamann outlines three ways that Kant aimed to purify reason: first, through the attempt to make reason independent from history in the form of tradition and belief; second, from everyday experience; and, finally and most importantly for Hamann, from language.⁵⁰ Hamann is critical of Kant's claim that language is merely receptive while concepts are spontaneous.⁵¹ For Hamann, Kantian philosophy treats language as a mere form of representation of an independently existing ideal object: "metaphysics abuses the word-signs and figures of speech of our empirical knowledge by treating them as nothing but hieroglyphs and types of ideal relations. In this case, Hamann states, nothing is left for language other than "a wind sough, a magic shadow play" or what Hamann refers to as the "unstable, indefinite something = x."⁵² There exists in the Kantian treatment of language a total abstraction from empirical knowledge resulting in a purely formal and logical conception of language. In light of this, Hamann also criticises the Kantian belief in the "universal and necessary reliability" of mathematics.⁵³ For Hamann, "[t]he apodictic certainty of mathematics depends mainly on a curiologial portrayal of the simplest, most sensible intuition."⁵⁴ The function of mathematical signs is to provide the representation of a purely conceptual relationship external to the signs themselves. The content represented in mathematical concepts precedes their sensible representation in symbols and signs. For Hamann, however, it is an error to generalise the mathematical model to language.⁵⁵ The belief that thought totally precedes language is the point at which Kantian philosophy makes its fundamental error. For Hamann, such a conception of language views language

⁴⁹ See Beiser, *Fate of Reason*: 38. The influence of Hamann on post-Kantian philosophy is often underestimated. As Fredrick Beiser states, "Although the "Metakritik" was not published until 1800, it exercised a considerable subterranean influence. Hamann sent a copy to Herder, who in turn sent one to Jacobi. Through Herder and Jacobi, some of the ideas of the "Metakritik" became common post-Kantian currency."

⁵⁰ Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 208.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 210-11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵⁵ See also, G.W.F. Hegel. *The Science of Logic* trans. George di Giovanni. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 180-1. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel criticises the use of mathematical symbols by philosophy. As he writes, "the perversity of enlisting mathematical categories for injecting some determination into the method and the content of philosophical science shows in the fact that, inasmuch as mathematical formulas signify thoughts and conceptual distinctions, this meaning must rather first be indicated, determined and justified in philosophy." Hegel's critique of the symbol and runs throughout his work, from the *Aesthetics* to the *Logic*. I am currently in the process of completing an article on Hegel and Kant on the symbol and I plan to make Benjamin's relationship to this thought the subject of future research.

as merely receptive. As such, words are conceived of as the empty vessels for a form of pure logical thought that precedes language.

Against the formal Kantian conception of language, Hamann asserts that words “have an aesthetic and logical faculty.”⁵⁶ Language is conceived of as belonging to both sensibility—as audible objects—and the understanding—as meaning. For Hamann, these two aspects of language as tied to sensibility and the understanding as “the two stems of human knowledge from One common root.”⁵⁷ For Hamann, the way in which meaning is established in language signals an original unity of sensibility and the understanding, something that is lost in the Kantian treatment of language as a mere form of representation. As Hamann states,

This meaning and its determination arises... from the combination of a word-sign, which is *a priori* arbitrary and indifferent and *a posteriori* necessary and indispensable, with the intuition of the word itself; through this reiterated bond the concept is communicated to, imprinted on, and incorporated in the understanding, by means of the word-sign as by the intuition itself.⁵⁸

Kant’s idealism misunderstands the nature of language by conceiving of words as mere signs thus viewing language primarily as a formal and logical form of *designation*. Language comes to appear as a merely arbitrary form of representation of an external universal meaning. For Hamann, however, language only becomes determinate through its use. Hamann claims that reason itself is linguistic. Conceived of as linguistic, reason itself must be seen as mediated by experience and history. It is here that we find the essence of Hamann’s critique of Kant. Hamann conceives of thought as essentially linguistic. As a result, language is not the arbitrary representation of a universal concept external to it, but is itself the universal element, albeit a universal that is able to encompass experience and history. Language is, therefore, a universal element in that it exceeds the immediacy and particularity of experience and history while, at the same time, containing both within itself. I will now move onto Benjamin’s treatment of language in order to examine some of the Hamannian elements he mobilises to criticise the post-Kantian theory of language.

⁵⁶ Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*: 215.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

4.4 Benjamin's Conception of Language

What Benjamin calls the bourgeois conception of language resembles, at the surface level, the conception of life Benjamin examined in the "Life of Students." In that text, Benjamin took aim at the instrumentalism he sees as characteristic both the dominant mode of thought within the institution of the university and its alienating effect on the life of students. This instrumental mode of thought is characterised by a separation between different fields on knowledge (specifically, the more practical vocations and the 'useless' philosophical faculty) and, alongside this, a separation between the material and spiritual aspects of life. Benjamin begins to delve deeper, not merely locating this separation at the level of society or cultural objects, but at the very foundation of thought itself in language. The fact that Benjamin takes language to be the foundation of thought and reason already indicates that he is indebted to the figure of Hamann. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, it was Hamann's critique of Kant that Benjamin singled out as exemplary. In addition, Benjamin begins the text with an explicit critique of what he calls the "bourgeois view of language" which is characterised by a form of instrumentalism.

For Benjamin, the bourgeois theory of language is characterised by the following: "It holds the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being."⁵⁹ In contrast to this theory, Benjamin offers his conception of *pure language* that "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It means: *in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God.*"⁶⁰ The theory that Benjamin identifies as the bourgeois theory is an extension of the designatory and signal conception of language that Hamann located as characteristic of the Kantian philosophy.

Benjamin's text "On Language" is dominated by the theological motifs indicated in this quotation, a theme that is echoed in the fragment "On Perception" which I examined in the previous chapter. This, in itself, represents an implicit critique of the Kantian idealism that both Benjamin and Hamann portray as emphasizing the mathematical and scientific character of thought at the expense of the linguistic. In this text there is a tension between a conception of pure language as a unified continuum between subject-object and

⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such" in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 65.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 65.

human language as an instrumental form of representation.⁶¹ Here once again we find Benjamin echoing the theme of a lost form of spiritual creativity present in these early texts. Benjamin marks this loss in decidedly theological language:

[T]he Fall marks the birth of the human word, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of the name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to be expressly, as it were, magic. The word must communicate something (other than itself).⁶²

The representational aspect of speech, characteristic of the human language, is overcome by reclaiming its limited creative power of the act of naming. Benjamin is again echoing Hamann who, in his *Aesthetica in Nuncce*, describes a conception the language of divine creation as “speech to creatures through creation; for day unto day utters speech, and night unto night show knowledge.”⁶³ Hamann locates a fault either outside or within us that leaves nothing for us in nature other than “jumbled verses and *disjecti membra poetae* [limbs of the dismembered poet].”⁶⁴

For Hamann, the poet’s task becomes the imitation or, bolder yet, the reordering of the fragments in order to provide meaning to the brokenness of reality. On the other hand, the philosopher’s task is to interpret the loss of meaning, not to reinterpret or reorder that which has been broken. In either case, the brokenness of reality, the fragmentation of meaning and the loss of the immediacy of the Absolute is taken as the a priori conditions for their specific task. In contrast to a view that takes this loss as a precondition, Hamann demands the spiritual renewal of the analogy of God and man.⁶⁵ Such a spiritual renewal would provide the unity that is necessarily lacking for both the poet and the philosopher, a lack of unity that for them can only be registered in terms of a fundamental loss of meaning.

⁶¹ See Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*: 66. In his *Aesthetics in nuncce*, Hamann describes representational language: “To speak is to translate—from an angelic language into a human language, that is, to translate thoughts into words—things into names—images into signs, which can be poetic or curiological, historical or symbolic or hieroglyphic— —and philosophical or characteristic. This kind of translation (that is, speech) resembles more than anything else the wrong side of a tapestry... or it can be compared with an eclipse of the sun, which can be looked at in a vessel of water.”

⁶² Benjamin, “On Language as Such”: 71.

⁶³ Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*: 65.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 78-9. “The more vividly this idea of the image of the invisible God dwells in our heart, the more able we are to see and taste his loving-kindness. Every impression of nature in man is not only a memorial but also a warrant of fundamental truth: Who is the LORD. Every reaction of man unto created things is an epistle and seal that we partake of the divine nature, and that we are his offspring.”

In a similar fashion to Hamann, Benjamin registers the problem of the problem of language in religious terms as the loss of objectivity of meaning. However, the problem of language is also registered in subjective terms as the loss of man's creative capacity. The central theme of "The Life of Students", the loss the creative spirit, is here played out here through the theological analogy of the Fall. In this text, therefore, it is possible to locate the playing out of the hidden crisis Benjamin speaks of in "The Life of Students" at the very foundation of thought in language. What Benjamin adds to his conception of the crisis pointed to in "The Life of Students" is an account of the genesis of that crisis rendered in theological terms. Again in this text Benjamin marks a situation in which human beings are alienated from the totality of their creative will. The Fall marks the point at which language becomes mediate and is rendered merely signal or designatory. For Benjamin, however, "language never gives *mere* signs."⁶⁶ Benjamin must demonstrate the non-representational aspect of language. In doing so, Benjamin's critique of the post-Kantian theory echoes Hamann's criticisms of Kant. In language, Benjamin seeks to locate the union of conception and spontaneity, precisely the union that was lacking, according to Hamann, in the Kantian conception of language as a mere form of representation.

Benjamin's conception of pure language stands against the bourgeois theory of language that cannot create, but can only represent a meaning derived from a source external to language. Human language is quite literally instrumental in that is conceived of as the tool by which meaning comes to be imposed on the world of things. The form of language that Benjamin points towards in this text is not that simply rejects the representational aspect of language, but one that acknowledge the inexorable and irreducible relationship between object and name. In light of this, Benjamin rejects not only the bourgeois theory of language, but also what he refers to as the mystical theory. The mystical theory claims that language speaks the essence of things and the word expresses the thing-in-itself. It is important to note that, for Benjamin, language cannot capture the thing-in-itself in its totality; the object must always exceed its name. As he states, "the thing in itself has no word, being created from God's word and known in its name by a human word."⁶⁷ For Benjamin, language does not simply imitate the creative word of God; language is not a form of intellectual intuition. Instead, the human language gains its limited creative power in its participation in rather than its imitation of the creative word of

⁶⁶ Benjamin, "On Language as Such": 69.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

God. This is not a one-sided relationship, as he notes earlier in the text. God's creation is only completed when the things receive their name from man.⁶⁸ It is this limited creative power that has been lost, a loss that finds its expression in both the bourgeois and mystical theories of language.

In the bourgeois theory, language is conceived of as an instrument to designate a conceptual meaning that is external to language. For its part, the mystical theory claims to capture the essence of things as the identity between word and object. However, as Benjamin states, the thing-in-itself is *mute*, it is created by God's word and becomes known in the act of naming.⁶⁹ The mystical theory is, therefore, the counterpart to the bourgeois theory in its claim to capture the thing not at the level of appearance, but in its essence. In both cases, the thing only becomes significant and meaningful in its subordination to language. The mystical theory misunderstands language as grasping the essence of the thing making the name identical to the object. For its part, the bourgeois theory errs in its belief that language expresses a conceptual content thus rendering the name an arbitrary sign that exists independently of the object.

Benjamin, in contrast, develops a linguistic conception of knowledge drawing on Hamann's metacritique of Kant. It is in the "translation of the language of things into that of man" that Benjamin locates his fundamental alternative to the Kantian representational theory of language. Translation, for Benjamin, works by way of a "continuum of transformations, not the abstract areas of identity and similarity."⁷⁰ Benjamin's theory of language is neither signal—this is the bourgeois theory—nor is the name conceived of as identical with the object—this is the mystical theory. Rather, it works by way of translation and it is in translation of the language of things to the language of man that knowledge is added to the object.

The act of naming differs from God's act of conception. God makes things knowable by creating them; man knows things by giving them a name. Benjamin retains the creative power of language without making the world of things identical to its representation in language. Benjamin's conception of language as naming acts an alternative to the Kantian conception of language as mere representation of a conceptual meaning that is both outside of language and things in themselves. Benjamin is able to

⁶⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 70.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

account for the real externality of things and their immanent meaning as an object of knowledge within language. If language is conceived of as absolutely creative it would be identical to the word of God. The human language is, however, not the language of revelation. The paradisiacal language that existed prior to the Fall is characterised by Benjamin as one of “perfect knowledge.”⁷¹ The fall of the human language from a state of perfect knowledge is necessary for language to achieve its autonomy. Language becomes ‘magic’ in its ability to name, to provide a meaning that is self-sufficient and free. However, this does not change the fact that the bourgeois theory rests on a fundamental misconception: that the world of things lacks its own intrinsic meaning independent of language.

Under the spell of this conception of language, the bourgeois theory misunderstands language as merely representational providing only arbitrary signs. Language is conceived of as arbitrary and accidental; the name appears to coincide with its object reflectively and contingently. There is, in other words, no necessary connection between the name and the object it designates. At the same time, Benjamin rejects a conception of language that is absolutely creative in which the name expresses perfect knowledge of the object’s essence. For Benjamin, the human language is not the language of revelation, but of knowledge. The fundamental condition of the human language is that it must, in the end, communicate something other than itself. It remains creative insofar as it provides meaning and adds knowledge to its object, but it is not absolutely creative in the same way as the word of God. With this Benjamin can account for both the real independence of the external world of things and the limited creative power of the human naming language. The object retains its particular material existence while, at the same time, becoming an object of knowledge through language. Language adds knowledge to the object without sacrificing the integrity of the object’s existence. The object finds its expression in language. This form expression does not need to sacrifice the particularity of the object for its universality. According to Benjamin’s conception, language is neither purely immediate nor merely a medium, but necessarily both at the same time. Language does not communicate a conceptual content as in the bourgeois signal theory, but a material content. The content of language is inextricably bound up with the concrete existence of that which it communicates.

⁷¹ Ibid., 71.

Benjamin's account of language does justice to the experience of the object that it expresses, precisely the form of experience that is denied in the representational bourgeois theory of language. The continuum of translation Benjamin identifies finds the objectivity of its meaning in reference to God: "The objectivity of this translation is, however, guaranteed by God. For God created things."⁷² This is the point at which Benjamin is closest to Hamann's renewal of the analogy between God and man. The continuity between languages and the continuity between the world of things and the human world can only be guaranteed if both have reference to the divine word. In the absence of God, language becomes merely designatory, purely signal. In the absence of the divine word, the human language finds itself in a situation of 'overnaming'.⁷³ Without an objective source of reference—one that guarantees the immanent connection between human beings and nature—the human language comes to subordinate all meaning to itself. This is a meaning that is, by its nature, creative but also unstable and tautological because it has no external reference other than itself. The result of this conception of language is the rise of a second immediacy. The first immediacy of pure knowledge, in which the naming language stands between the creative power of God and the mute but expressive language of things, is supplanted by a world of convention. As Benjamin states, "In stepping outside of the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign."⁷⁴

In human language, the communication of the concrete is replaced with what Benjamin refers to as "the mediateness of all communication". If, according to Benjamin, language communicates something other than itself, the bourgeois theory expresses a situation in which language only communicates itself—a tautology. Accordingly, the thing becomes entangled in the human language and the judgement of its truth is the adequacy of its representation. The thing has no truth of its own and it must be grasped from the outside by a designatory sign. In turn, the human language, broken up into many languages that find no immanent form of measure. The measure of truth is the external comparison of signs, not the immanent connection found in pure language in reference to the creative word of God. The external dialogue between different human languages is supplanted by

⁷² Ibid., 70.

⁷³ Ibid., 73. "Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them not being, calling them by their proper names. There is, in the relation of human languages to that of things something that can be approximately called 'overnaming'—the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all deliberate muteness."

⁷⁴ Ibid., 71.

the unity Benjamin finds in his conception of translation: “All higher language is a translation of lower ones, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement made up of language.”⁷⁵

It is here, perhaps, that it is possible to locate the truth of the bourgeois theory of language. It is true insofar as it recognises that language must refer to something other than itself; it is false insofar as that the other is not outside of language in some transcendent conceptual or logical realm, but also appears within language in a distorted or displaced form. Benjamin’s theory of language is attentive to such a displacement, a displacement that cannot be covered up by embracing the designatory power of the human language. As Benjamin states, “language is in every case not only the communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable.”⁷⁶ The fundamental situation of the human language is that it is not, nor can it be, the divine language of creation. It is the medium that expresses the mental being of a thing without that thing becoming enslaved to its name. It adds knowledge to the object without making that object identical to its appearance as an object of knowledge. If the thing were to become identical to our knowledge of its nature would not only be mute, but silent.

The continuity that Benjamin perceives in translation between the object, man, and eventually in God, stands at the precipice between the texts I examined in the sections above and the more epistemologically oriented texts I examined in the previous chapter. Here, Benjamin sees an underlying unity within language that echoes the call to youth, the Poetic, and spiritual creativity, but also to the form of absolute experience that I discussed in the previous chapter. A mediated unity of subject and object is found in this text at the level of language, a unity that has been torn asunder by a loss of meaning perpetuated by the false creativity of the representational signal theory of language. In this text, Benjamin rejects theories of language that reduce meaning to a set of empirical facts or to the expression of a pure *a priori* idea. At the same time, like “The Life of Students”, the longing for a lost form of creativity marks this text. The arbitrary and merely designatory language of signs is creative, but also essentially meaningless since it has no form of reference other than itself. The renewal of a real but limited form of creativity could take the form of a renewal of the analogy between man and God.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

In this text, there is a sense of longing for a true world beneath the second immediacy, the second nature of mere convention. However, Benjamin recognises that the nature that has been lost to us is not one of undifferentiated first nature, but one in which the human language participates in the language of things. Language is mediate, but not in the relationship between concept and sign, but between name and thing. It is a materialist theory of language in that it recognises and does not extinguish the particularity of the thing. For Benjamin, language is universal, but a universal in which the particular participates and can find expression. Benjamin's theory of language offers a *differentiated unity between subject and object within language rather than the mere designation of things through language*. It is the immanent truth of the human language that it expresses something other than itself, even when it does not acknowledge it does so. Benjamin, therefore, recognises the material content of language, a content that is obscured in the bourgeois theory of language and its tendency to 'overname'. Benjamin's theory of language speaks to the truth of language, a truth that has been buried beneath the torsion of knowledge and experience that is characteristic of the historical epoch in which we live.

It is possible to say that "On Language" acts as a prolegomenon to the epistemological texts that follow in its claim that the Absolute does not exist 'out there' beyond experience. Rather, the Absolute manifests itself in a fragmented form within experience. The Benjaminian conception of language speaks to a form of experience that has been degraded—the symbolic and imagistic quality of language. For Benjamin, the objects and concepts which language expresses are not merely signs of an external purely conceptual content or bare empirical facts. While critical of Kant, Benjamin retains a notion of Kantian hypotyposis.⁷⁷ Language is not primarily arbitrary and signal, but visual or perceptual. Words are not the expression of logical facts or merely representational signs, but contain within themselves a form of perception. Benjamin presupposes language

⁷⁷ In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant characterises his account of symbolism as a kind of intuitive representation [*Vorstellung*] or exhibition [*exhibitio*]. Kant divides the intuitive mode of presentation into two forms: schematic—which represents a concept directly by means of demonstration—and symbolic—which can only represent a concept indirectly by way of analogy. These forms of presentation are what Kant calls *hypotyposes*—the sensible expression of a concept—rather than *characterization*—the mere designation of a concept by sensible signs [*sinnliche Zeichen*]. Here, Kant is explicitly contrasting his treatment of the symbol to those of the Leibnizian-Wolffian school who treated it as a mere abstract and arbitrary sign. Instead, for Kant, what characterises both schematic and symbolic modes of presentation is their function as hypotyposes: both schemas and symbols express a concept as an object of intuition. For Kant, therefore, the symbol is a mode of *expression* rather than of *designation*. I plan to examine this further, in relation to Hegel's critique of the symbol, in further research.

as an “ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation.”⁷⁸ In other words, even as an object of knowledge, we must presuppose the existence of the thing, something that cannot be fully extinguished in its coming to be a linguistic being. Things in themselves do not participate in the human language; their community is a more or less purely material one. In contrast, the human language is an immaterial and mental community.

At the heart of Benjamin’s non-instrumental conception of language is the belief that language does not actually subordinate the material community of things, their real existence, to the human language. Rather, in truth, the human language, in communicating itself, recognises the distinction between the mental being of things and their phenomenal existence. The object, as it appears in the human language, is incomplete. The name cannot fully capture the object even though linguistic being is the ultimate reality for human beings. Benjamin’s conception of language points beyond either the bourgeois or mystical theories that claim to capture the totality objects in language. While language might be the ultimate reality for Benjamin, he also retains a strong distinction between the mental and phenomenal being of things. Further, in demanding that things can only be perceived in their manifestation, Benjamin rejects the possibility of a purely ideal language. The claim that the thing both exists as an object of knowledge and as a real being external to human language points to his conception of truth. In light of this, I will now move onto a discussion of Benjamin’s conception of truth, which will help to clarify this conception of language and its relation to experience. Following this, I conclude with a discussion of Benjamin’s dissertation on the concept of critique in German Romanticism.

4.5 Towards a Materialist Conception of the Idea

The conception of language that Benjamin develops in “On Language” has epistemological implications that cannot be understood to hold sway only in the sphere of language. Throughout this chapter I have emphasised a middle-road in Benjamin’s writings between a form of thought that is completely immersed in the empirical and one that is totally subordinated to an externalised conception of the idea or form. At this stage, it is necessary to view the implications of Benjamin’s conception of the relationship between concept or idea and reality in relationship to a notion of concept-formation and a conception of truth.

⁷⁸ Benjamin, “On Language as Such”: 67.

In order to establish Benjamin's rejection of the neo-Kantian idea of concept-formation, i.e. the perspective that views concepts as totally external to experience, then I must establish the way in which Benjamin maintains the integrity of the conceptual. Put simply, if Benjamin is to reject the neo-Kantian notion of concept formation, I need to demonstrate that Benjamin's own notion of concept-formations does not simply take over the neo-Kantian understanding of the concept as something logically prior to sense-experience. At the same time, I have shown that Benjamin consistently rejects the empiricist reduction of concepts to the by-product of ephemeral sense experience. In other words, I must show how Benjamin locates his understanding of conceptuality within the tension between a form of material empiricism and logical idealism.

First and foremost, it is important to understand that, for Benjamin, while the concept is an abstraction formed from the material of experience it does not exist in contradistinction to experience. Following from this understanding of the concept, Benjamin rejects the timelessness of the concept's truth. As he writes in the fragment "On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy" written in 1923: "Timelessness' must... be unmasked as an exponent [*ein Exponent*] of the bourgeois concept of truth."⁷⁹ In this brief fragment Benjamin attacks the one of the central tenets of 20th century epistemology, the notion of intentionality. This notion is developed by Franz Brentano and would later be inherited, in a modified form, by Husserlian phenomenology. Put simply, Brentano's conception of intentionality is understood as the claim that all mental states and experiences are directed towards an object. Central to Brentano's thesis is the separation of mental and physical objects. The object to which our consciousness is directed is immanent, in the sense that it only exists within consciousness. Next to the physical object there is a mental object to which thought is directed. Thought is, therefore, directed immanently towards itself rather than towards an external object.

For Brentano, when I think about the city of London, for instance, I am not thinking about the actual city, but a mental representation of that object that is immanent to my thinking. Thus, thinking about a physical object entails a mental abstraction from its real existence. The object of thought is not the object of sense experience. The error Benjamin sees in the notion of intentionality is a fundamental error he perceives in both in the form

⁷⁹ Walter Benjamin, "On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy" in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 404-5.

of neo-Kantianism that I examined at length in the previous chapter and the bourgeois theory of language I examined above. This fundamental error is related to a notion of truth.

This text begins rather abruptly with the claim that the individual disciplines seek to discredit philosophy by demonstrating ‘contradictions’. For Benjamin, however, the notion of contradiction is central to his concept of truth. In the fragment, “Language and Logic, written between 1920 and 1921 he describes philosophy as “the only realm in which the truth becomes manifest, namely with a sound like music.”⁸⁰ This conception of truth is described as the *harmonic concept of truth*, but Benjamin does not stop here.⁸¹ He claims that this form of truth must be acquired so that the “false quality of watertightness that characterises its delusion vanishes from the authentic concept, the concept of truth.”⁸² Benjamin contrasts the harmonic concept of truth from the authentic concept of truth. Acquisition of the harmonic concept is necessary, but so is the denial of its appearance of harmony, its semblance of truth, because that semblance is a delusion. Thus, the mode of criticism Benjamin proposes is sensitive to the semblance of truth, a semblance that is a necessary aspect of a form of thinking that only thinks itself. Benjamin’s concept of truth, in contrast, retains a necessary tension between the phenomenal and the ideal or appearance and essence. Put simply, there is a sense in which the phenomenal being of the thing resists its subordination to its abstract existence as a mental being or concept.

At this stage, a further question must be asked: how does Benjamin define conceptuality? If it is not the purely ideal concept of neo-Kantianism, which conceives of the concept in contradistinction to the particular and the empirical, then Benjamin must be pointing towards an alternative. This question takes us back to the intentionality thesis. The intentionality thesis, as I said above, relied on the positing of an ideal mental object alongside the real physical one. There arises from this claim a problem of subjectivism and intersubjectivity: how can the mental object that I think of be compared to the mental object of another person? One position that can resolve this is that of the reporter, the

⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Language and Logic” in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 272.

⁸¹ In his book *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-time of History*, James McFarland attempts to demonstrate the compatibility of Benjamin’s notion of truth and a Nietzschean conception of harmonic truth. Ultimately, McFarland fails to demonstrate this and, in the process, reduces the relationship between Benjamin and Nietzsche to one of simple analogy. For a more detailed critique, see my review of McFarland’s book in *Radical Philosophy* 161.

⁸² Benjamin, “Language and Logic”: 272.

banal philosopher or the specialised scientist whom, Benjamin describes as, “indulges in lengthy descriptions of the object at which his gaze is directed.”⁸³ This adequately addresses the obvious problem of subjectivism in the intentionality thesis from within the thesis of intentionality itself. The solution is to define the object according to its physical qualities. If I can abstract from the object those essential qualities that it possesses as a representation it is possible to talk about it objectively. Benjamin, however, aims to dispute such a notion of objectivity. As we have already seen in the section on the Poetic, Benjamin distinguishes his mode of criticism from that which claims to capture the object through a distillation of its material qualities. Similarly, we found Benjamin questioning the bourgeois theory of language that held “the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being.”⁸⁴

In contrast to the idealist and empiricist conceptions of objectivity, I propose to define Benjamin’s own notion of objectivity as a *resistant objectivity*. Benjamin’s concept of truth and objectivity subverts both the idealist perspective characteristic of neo-Kantianism and the concept of truth held by the empirical realist. It is important to note that the objects towards which Benjamin directs his gaze are more complex than objects of experience traditionally conceived. The spheres of history and art have not traditionally been conceived of as objective, but as the spheres in which subjectivity dominates. Thus, they lack the same form of validity granted to the exact sciences, a problem that we found expressed in Rickert’s notion of historical concept-formation.

Rather than granting these spheres their own form of immanent truth, Rickert subordinated them to the concepts of validity and objectivity of the sciences. As we saw with both Rickert and Cohen, the aim was to restore philosophy’s dignity as an objective and eternally valid universal science. Benjamin does not pursue the same path, although he too is interested in the truth and objectivity of his object. Instead of hypostasizing the scientific conception of objectivity, he questions its efficacy by claiming that the contradictions that the sciences claim discredit philosophy remain present in the form of objectivity and validity that dominates the natural sciences. I take this to mean that the contradiction between a temporally or historically mediated form of experience and a pure or scientific experience is not overcome by the separation between the phenomenal and the ideal or essence and appearance.

⁸³ Benjamin, “On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy”, 404.

⁸⁴ Benjamin, “On Language as Such”, 62.

Benjamin's notion of concept-formation must be considered in light of his rejection of the Kantian and neo-Kantian conception of history. For Benjamin, the concept of history held by both Kant and neo-Kantianism views history in terms of an infinite movement towards an externally posited ethical idea. This conception of history can be gleaned both in Kant's own philosophy of history and Cohen's translation of the Kantian concept of history into the language of the Jewish Enlightenment. In the *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant writes, that "an event must be sought which points to the existence of such a cause and to its effectiveness in the human race, *undetermined with regard to time*, and which would allow progress toward the better to be concluded as an inevitable consequence."⁸⁵ Kant conceives of the concrete historical event as a *historical sign* that represents the universal progressive tendency of the human race towards the better. As a historical sign, the event is the manifestation of an idea that totally transcends its actual phenomenal shape. For Kant, the event signals the existence of an idea that can both be extended infinitely into the past and into the future. The sphere of history is conceived of as an object from which the manifestation of the idea, in separation from its phenomenal appearance, can be deduced scientifically and systematically.

For Benjamin, truth and the idea are eminently historical. Truth is, for Benjamin, something determinate and cannot be fully derived from the concept deductively and systematically. The reason for this is that while essence appears or is represented in the higher concept, it is not extinguished in this manifestation. At the same time, Benjamin cannot simply embrace a position that captures the concept as something immanently complete in space and time through a distillation of its truth as a set of empirical facts. As we have seen, he rejects this form of empiricism in the sphere of art, history and language. The truth of a historical object is not "captured in terms of the pragmatic description of details."⁸⁶ Rather, Benjamin accepts the necessity of grasping the truth of a historical object conceptually.

When, in "The Life of Students", he speaks of grasping the metaphysical structure of the history, he speaks in terms of the "idea of the French Revolution".⁸⁷ At first glance, it appears that Benjamin is echoing Kant, for whom the French Revolution was precisely the sort of historical sign that reveals the eternal fact of progressive tendencies in human

⁸⁵ Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*: 151.

⁸⁶ Benjamin, "The Life of Students", 37.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 37

history. However, it is important to note Benjamin's conception of the relationship between the phenomenal and the ideal. In the fragment "Language and Logic", he alludes to a page of text that has been lost. In that page he discusses the relationship between the intentionless conception of truth and the veiled image of Sais. This discussion reappears in the *Trauerspielbuch*:

Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention. This, indeed, is just what could be meant by the story of the veiled image of Sais, the unveiling of which was fatal for whomever thought thereby to learn the truth.⁸⁸

In this passage, Benjamin is stating that truth is not something that can be grasped intentionally as an object of our ephemeral and phenomenal sense experience. Truth is not something that can be uncovered as immanently complete and present to us within the horizon of history or empirical experience. It is not mere fact, it, but something that reveals itself in the course of history.

How, then, does Benjamin distinguish himself from the Kantian or neo-Kantian position that conceives of the truth of history as an infinite task? Some hints can be found in what Kant says about the French Revolution:

The revolution of a gifted people which we have seen unfolding in our day may succeed or miscarry; it may be filled with misery and atrocities... I say, nonetheless finds in the hearts of all spectators... a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm, the very expression of which is fraught with danger; this sympathy, therefore, can have no other cause than a moral predisposition in the human race.⁸⁹

For Kant, the French Revolution, as an expression of a historical sign, held little value in itself. What value it did have was its ability to arouse enthusiasm in the disinterested spectator. This enthusiasm indicates, regardless of the success or failure of a particular historical event, a universal desire for "progress toward the better" and the universal human disposition towards the ideal.⁹⁰ Here, we find in the Kantian conception of history a tendency that reoccurs in the neo-Kantian idealism of Lange, Cohen and Rickert—the absolute separation of the actuality of the empirical event from the externalised rational idea. The polar opposite of this form of historical idealism would be the sort of historical

⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin, *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama* trans. George Steiner. (London: New Left Books, 2009), 36.

⁸⁹ Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*: 153.

⁹⁰ Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*: 155. As Kant states, "genuine enthusiasm always moves only toward what is ideal and, indeed, to what is purely moral, such as the concept of right, and it cannot be grafted onto self-interest."

realism that Rickert convincingly disputed and that, as I have shown, Benjamin himself repeatedly criticised. The realist views the historical event as something that contains an immanent form of meaning and significance that is complete. Or, in other words, the truth of an event or object is exhausted in its appearance in reality. There is no secret or hidden truth that needs to be deciphered. Rather, truth is fully manifest in space and time and, therefore, is fully accessible within the reality of sensuous experience. Benjamin rejects the outcome of both abstract idealism and material empiricism while retaining elements from both. As he writes in “On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy”, the object itself possesses authority. However, the empirical object remains within itself, it lacks a form of external measure. This is the error of the empiricist art critic that Benjamin examines in the essay on Hölderlin. While we may direct our gaze at the empirical object, the philosopher is interested in the truth, something that transcends the object’s strictly factual empirical existence.

Unlike the idealist, Benjamin conceives the historical event or object as something that has intrinsic meaning and significance while also representing an idea that transcends its specificity. As such, the object is both an essential manifestation of an idea, but also an incomplete one. Here Benjamin echoes the conception of perception and the incompleteness of the object that he puts forwards in the essay “On Language”. For Benjamin, the truth is not the same as the truth for the banal philosopher or specialised scientist who emphasises the facticity of the object in order to distil its truth: “there is no truth about an object. Truth is only *in* it.”⁹¹ Truth is not fixed in a particular place or time, but is something that is temporally mediated. As Benjamin states, “it is bound to a historical base and changes with history.”⁹² At the same time, when in “The Life of Students” Benjamin speaks of his interest in the idea of the French Revolution, it is not an idea in the Kantian sense as something stripped of its historical and empirical content. A mode of inquiry must be developed that can both account for the object’s immanent objectivity without sacrificing it to a purely external form of measure that reduces it retroactively to a manifestation or representation of an a priori idea.

It is at this point that I will turn to Benjamin’s dissertation on Romantic art criticism. My emphasis will be on the Romantic form of criticism and its conception of the immanent Absolute. In the Romantic theory of reflection, the traditional distinction

⁹¹ Benjamin, “On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy”: 404.

⁹² Ibid.

between subject and object is undermined. This provides the ground for a form of criticism that can be said to be immanent since both critic and object of criticism occupy relative points in the same medium of reflection. This idea of reflection points towards a conception of objectivity that is markedly different from both idealism and empiricism traditionally conceived.

4.6 The German Romantic Theory of Reflection

In his dissertation on the concept of criticism in German Romanticism, Benjamin describes modern concept of criticism as a “negative court of judgement”.⁹³ Modern criticism lacks a concept; its form of criticism has come to be determined by a “deteriorated praxis”.⁹⁴ Benjamin finds common cause with the Romantics in their attempt to locate a form of criticism that is not merely negative. In contrast, Romantic art was guided by a notion of a task. This conception of criticism can be seen clearly in Schlegel’s essay “*Über Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister*”. There, Schlegel declares Goethe’s novel to be “one of those books which carries its own judgement with it, and spares the critic his labour. Indeed, not only does it judge itself; also describes itself.”⁹⁵ For Schlegel, criticism does not contain either a pedagogic or negative aim, but is essential formative. The basic formulation of this concept of criticism is that “criticism is the consummation of the work”.⁹⁶ For Benjamin, contemporary criticism overlooks the specific achievement of Romantic art criticism: the winning of the autonomy of both the object of criticism and criticism itself. Contemporary criticism can be defined, in short, as the negative court of judgement. The Oxford English Dictionary defines criticism as “[t]he action of criticizing, or passing judgement upon the qualities or merits of anything; esp. the passing of unfavourable judgement; fault-finding, censure”. For Benjamin, the Romantic concept of criticism differs from the contemporary concept in two decisive respects: first, it is not merely negative, but has positive and productive aspects; and, second, it is not based on what is strictly subjective and individual, but has a universal foundation grounded within the objectivity and structure of the work

⁹³ Walter Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism” in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 1

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 155

⁹⁵ Schlegel, “On Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*” in J.M. Bernstein, *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 275.

⁹⁶ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism”: 177.

itself. It is at this point that Benjamin locates the superiority of Romantic art criticism: “not only did Schlegel’s concept of criticism achieve freedom from heteronomous aesthetic doctrines, but it made this freedom possible in the first place by setting up for artworks a criterion other than the rule—namely, the criterion of an immanent structure specific to the work itself.”⁹⁷

Central to the Romantic theory of art is its self-understanding of art as a ‘medium of reflection’ in which the object rather than the observing subject is conceived of as the source of reflection. With the understanding of the artwork as a medium of reflection, Benjamin writes, Romanticism secures on the side of the object and structure “the autonomy in the domain of art that Kant, in the third *Critique*, had lent to the power of judgement.”⁹⁸ Moreover, it is within this specific mode of criticism that art is raised to a universal: “criticism... is the medium in which the restriction of the individual work refers methodologically to the infinitude of art and finally is transformed into that infinitude.”⁹⁹

At the centre of this concept of criticism is the Romantic theory of reflection as a process in which the finite is transformed into the infinite in its proximity to the Absolute. Here we find Benjamin echoing some of the themes outlined in the essay on Hölderlin, namely the claim that criticism is not merely a subjective act of negative judgement, but is objective in character. However, this text differs from the Hölderlin essay in respect to its development of the epistemological elements in the Romantic concept of criticism. Further, what Benjamin aims for is not the mere appropriation of the Romantic concept of criticism for his own purposes. On the surface, Benjamin’s movement from a protracted engagement with neo-Kantianism to Romanticism makes a lot of sense. The immanence of the Romantic Absolute provides an obvious alternative to Cohen’s transcendent Absolute. However, it would be an error to simply replace neo-Kantian transcendence for Romantic immanence in Benjamin’s thought.

As I show Benjamin is quite clear about the limits of early Romanticism. Central to this text is the elucidation of the place early Romanticism occupies within what he calls the “problem-historical context”, a context that accommodates neo-Kantianism as well. As Benjamin shows, early German Romanticism represents a decisive moment not only within the concept of criticism, but the history of post-Kantian idealism itself. While Benjamin

⁹⁷ Ibid., 155.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 152.

clearly limits his investigation to art criticism, he also stresses the philosophical foundation of German Romanticism. He does so by demonstrating: first, the critical relationship between Romanticism and Fichte; and, second, the crucial relationship between Novalis' *Naturphilosophie* and Friedrich Schlegel's theory of art criticism. In demonstrating the formal and philosophical character of early German Romanticism, Benjamin points beyond the common understanding of Romanticism as an irrational and subjective aestheticism. Benjamin is, therefore, able to demonstrate the systematic and formal tendencies inherent in idealism. Even though the explicit topic of the dissertation is art criticism, Benjamin's own examination is thoroughly philosophical in character.

My own examination of Benjamin's dissertation will attempt to clarify the epistemological elements that Benjamin locates within the Romantic concept of reflection and criticism. After this examination, I demonstrate the limits Benjamin places on the Romantic concept of criticism for his own project. It is clear that Benjamin does not fully endorse the Romantic concept of criticism. Benjamin finds the Romantic concept of critique, on the whole, problematic in its attempt to define criticism as essentially productive. For Benjamin, the limit of the Romantic concept of criticism will be its tendency to dissolve the content of its object in a totalising conception of the Absolute. In this, Romanticism does not so much provide a fundamental alternative to neo-Kantianism, but its obverse face.

Benjamin situates the early Romantics, most notably Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, within a specific post-Kantian tradition that includes Fichte and Schelling. For Benjamin, what characterised this particular group of philosophers was their concern with the notion of *intellectual intuition* and, in turn, the relationship between the Absolute and experience. Put simply, what united this group was a reaction against the Kantian impasse in which the Absolute could be an object of thought, but could not be presented in experience.¹⁰⁰ However, despite an agreement between Fichte and the early Romantics that the Absolute can be made manifest in experience through the act of reflection, they differ on how such a manifestation should be conceived. In light of this, Benjamin's text begins with an examination of a point of continuity and discontinuity between Fichte and Romanticism—the theory of reflection. The Romantic theory of reflection, he states, must be understood within the context of the epistemological foundation of early German Romanticism,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 121.

specifically their appropriation and modification of Fichte's theory of reflection. What Benjamin aims to demonstrate, at least in part, is the novel development of Fichte's theory of reflection within German Romanticism and, therefore, the contribution of Romanticism to the philosophical history of post-Kantian idealism.

According to Benjamin, the importance of the development of Fichte's concept of reflection by early Romanticism is two-fold: first, it guaranteed the immediacy of cognition and, second, it contains a peculiar conception of the infinite within its process. For Benjamin, reflective thinking occupies an important place in both Fichtean and early Romantic philosophy because of "the limitless capacity by which it makes every prior reflection into the object of a subsequent reflection."¹⁰¹ For Benjamin, however, the crucial difference between the Fichtean and Romantic theories of reflection is the Romantic rejection of the subject as the focal point of reflection. Benjamin offers an account of the Romantic reading of Fichte's theory of reflection that is comprised of two levels. The first level is what Schlegel refers to as *sense*; it is the thinking of some-thing. However, reflection, properly speaking, is only constituted at the second level, which Schlegel refers to as *reason*.

The second level is the *thinking of thinking* in which the first form of thinking is taken to a higher level of abstraction. As Benjamin states, "the second level has emerged from the first level, through a genuine reflection, and thus without mediation... the thinking on the second level has arisen from the first by its own power and self-actively—namely as the self-knowledge of the first."¹⁰² From the perspective of the second level of reflection, thinking is *matter* and the thinking of thinking is *form*. For Fichte, as Benjamin states,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 123. This also the ground on which the Fichtean concept of reflection can be said to be a form of a 'spurious infinite' in that it risks deferring *ad infinitum* the point at which the reflecting subject and object of reflection are united. For Benjamin, however, Fichte avoids this problem by excluding the infinity of reflection from his theoretical account of cognition. The active deed is the positing of reflection: the 'I' posits itself in activity while the imagination posits the 'not-I' in relation to itself. Therefore, within the theoretical sphere, positing does not continue to the infinite, but is limited by the representation of the 'not-I' by the imagination. Theoretically the 'I' becomes fulfilled first through the act of representation and, finally, through the representation of the activity of representation. The recognition that the 'not-I' is a product of an original positing points to an immediate, albeit theoretical, unity of the 'I' and the 'not-I'. On the one hand, Fichte views the 'I' as complete and fulfilled through its theoretical cognition that the 'not-I' is an objectification of its consciousness. The overcoming of these objectifications is seen as an infinite task that must be carried on through the practical activity of the 'I' in the world. Fichte interrupts the 'spurious' infinite of reflection through the positing of a subject that realises its task in practical activity. Thus, in cognition reflection leads to the fulfilment of the 'I' in the fundamental unity of the 'I' and the 'not-I' while in the practical sphere of activity it "leads forward to the infinite." The exclusion of the infinite in cognition leads to a conception of vocation oriented around an infinite task—to disclose reality as the sum total of an original positing of an absolute subject.

¹⁰² Ibid., 127.

reflection is transformative, it is the “activity of reflecting on a form.”¹⁰³ The thinking of thinking arises immediately out of its origin in intuition thus establishing continuity between the two levels of reflection. It is in this way that knowledge of thinking—the second level—can be said to be systematic insofar as it is comprised of the lower level forms of thought. Benjamin suggests that the theory of reflection Fichte develops in *On the Concept of the Science of Knowledge* differs from the theory presented in the later *Science of Knowledge* that is grounded in intellectual intuition.¹⁰⁴

The Fichtean conception of intellectual intuition will prove problematic for the Romantics since it claims that the ground of subjectivity occurs prior to reflective experience in the activity of the self-positing ‘I’.¹⁰⁵ According to Benjamin, instead of following Fichte’s account of consciousness as the self-positing ‘I’, the Romantics exploit an earlier account of reflection found in Fichte’s *On the Concept of the Science of Knowledge*. In this text, there is an emphasis on the primacy of reflection over the act of positing or presupposition. Benjamin quotes Fichte from that text: “[The] action of freedom, through which the form turns into the form of the form as its content and returns into itself, is called ‘reflection’.”¹⁰⁶ Reflection is conceived of as the activity of reflecting on a form, not the activity of the ‘I’ reflecting on itself. For Benjamin, it is on the matter of reflection that the Fichtean and the early Romantic epistemologies come the closest. Crucially, what is at stake in Fichte’s original theory of reflection is not the cognition of an object through the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰⁴ See Winifried Menninghaus, “Walter Benjamin’s Exposition of the German Romantic Theory of Reflection” in Beatrice Hansen and Andrew Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*. (London: Continuum, 2002), 22-3. The short-comings of Benjamin’s account of Fichte are dealt with in detail by Winfried Menninghaus in his essay “Walter Benjamin’s Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection”. Put simply, Menninghaus emphasises the way in which Benjamin exploits Fichte’s own lack of clarity in defining the boundaries of reflection. It would seem that Benjamin addresses this tendency when he notes that it was precisely this lack of clarity that allowed the Romantics to push Fichte’s account of reflection in *On the Concept of the Science of Knowledge* “far beyond Fichte’s outline” (Benjamin, “On the Concept of Critique in German Romanticism”, 123). The question of whether or not the Romantics, or Benjamin for that matter, were good readers of Fichte seems secondary to Benjamin’s novel appropriation of the Fichtean account of reflection.

¹⁰⁵ This is what Fichte describes as a *Tathandlung* or fact-act. Fichte’s fact-act is the ground of the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness. Reflective or empirical consciousness marks a distinction between the self-conscious ‘fact’ and the conscious ‘act’, so Fichte must posit his unifying *Tathandlung* prior to reflection in order to assert an original or primordial unity between consciousness and self-consciousness. Thus, the *Tathandlung* does not occur within empirical consciousness. Rather, as the primordial unity of consciousness, it must be presupposed or posited prior to reflection. It is through the original unity of the *Tathandlung* that Fichte can assert the immediate unity of the ‘I’ that is self-unity, while accounting for the fact that in reflection there is a fundamental distinction between subject and object.

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism”: 122.

forms of intuition, but what Benjamin describes as the “self cognition of a method, of something formal—and the absolute subject represents nothing other than this.”¹⁰⁷

For Benjamin, the early Romantics see in this form of reflection the immediate grasping of the Absolute, not as the ‘I’ or object of intuition, but as the medium of reflection itself.¹⁰⁸ It is two forms of consciousness—what Benjamin calls “the form and the form of the form” and “knowing as the knowing of knowing”—in their mutual interconnectedness that grounds the immediacy of cognition and makes it intelligible. The Absolute acts as the medium in which this process occurs, an immediacy that is not that of intuition, but one that is methodological, formal and conceptual in character. Thus, for the Romantics it is not a question of grasping the Absolute as an object of intuition, but intellectually as the totality of interconnected surfaces of reflection. The Absolute is not conceived of as an external object that must be grasped, but one that would be present immanently within experience as the totality of the surfaces of reflection. The Absolute, as unity of reflective surfaces, would, therefore, not only include all objects external to the ‘I’, but the ‘I’ itself. As such, the Absolute is immediately present to reflection as the medium in which all reflection proceeds. In light of this conception of reflection, it is crucial not to grasp the Romantic infinite in a Fichtean way as the infinite striving for an externally objectified content, but as something that is immanently substantial and fulfilled.¹⁰⁹

The Romantic infinity of reflection is founded on the tenet that every reflection can become the subject of a further reflection. The third-level of reflection, the thinking of thinking of thinking, contains those lower forms of reflection (both intuition as matter and reason as form) within it as its content while, at the same time, transforming and intensifying the previous stages. Therefore, for Benjamin, if Fichte’s second-level reflection is “the form that takes the form as its content”, the third-level signals “something fundamentally new.”¹¹⁰ In the third level, the Absolute is not conceived of as something that is constituted prior to reflection to which reflection returns, but rather “[r]eflection constitutes the absolute and it constitutes it as a medium.”¹¹¹ By introducing the infinite into reflection, thinking turns into the ‘thinking of thinking of thinking’. This is the point at

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ It should be noted that Schlegel himself does not use the term “medium of reflection”, but that Benjamin coins it in order to described Schlegel’s conception of the Absolute that is unbounded from the subject or ‘I’ as the focal-point for reflection.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 129.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 132.

which the Romantic form of reflection becomes simultaneously both purely conceptual and immediately creative and productive. As Benjamin writes, “Romantic thinking sublates being and positing in reflection.”¹¹² Reflection is conceived of as both productive and unbounded from the ‘I’ as the centre of reflection. It is dispersed across multiple surfaces of reflection that are not conceived of as externally relating self-sufficient ‘I’s or subjects, but selves. There is no single originary or primordial moment of positing by an intellectual intuition in which thinking constitutes its object of reflection—the ‘I’—but a continual “process by which the mind becomes ‘the form of the form as its content’ takes place... incessantly, and first of all constitutes not the object but the form, the infinite and purely methodological character of true thinking.”¹¹³

Here it is possible to locate the formalistic character of the Romantic theory of art. The intensification of reflection leads to the progressive unfolding of ever higher and higher forms until it finally reaches the Absolute as “the thinking of thinking of thinking”. When the particular work of art, the content of reflection, is in-itself essentially incomplete. Critical reflection enters into a particular work in order to demonstrate it as a relative unity in the medium of reflection, i.e. the Absolute. The particular work is revealed to a relative unity within the medium of reflection, its relative unity gives way to a higher unity to which it belongs. As McCole puts it, [t]he fully unfolded continuum would articulate the medium, thus producing unity.”¹¹⁴ This unity is an absolute unity that contains both criticism and the artwork within itself as two moments in the same medium of reflection. As such, the distinct poles of subjects and objects wither away from the viewpoint of the Romantic form of reflection.

In conceiving of reality as a medium common to both the perceiving subject and perceived object, criticism and its object become two moments in a common medium. As Rudolph Gasché suggests, “the centres of reflection can be elevated to the medium of reflection itself [the Absolute] through reflexive intensification.”¹¹⁵ The Romantic theory of reflection succeeds in opening up the possible surfaces of reflection beyond the cognizing

¹¹² Ibid., 128.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 107.

¹¹⁵ Rudolph Gasché, “The Sober Absolute” in Beatrice Hansen and Andrew Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*. (London: Continuum, 2002), 62. While I appreciate Gasché’s exposition of Benjamin’s conception of the absolute, I think he ultimately wants Benjamin to adopt a neo-Kantian notion of a transcendent Absolute in contradistinction to the Romantic immanent Absolute. In contrast, I attempt to show how Benjamin attempts to find a path between immanence and transcendence.

subject. Foremost among these for the Romantics, was the sphere of art. Their interest lies in the undermining of a form of classicist aesthetics, which conceives of form as something external to the work, and theories of aesthetic genius that dissolve the artwork into a subjective product of the artist. In short, the aim was to legitimate the objectivity of criticism. As Benjamin states, “criticism comprises the knowledge of its object.”¹¹⁶ Intensive reflection on an artwork leads beyond the particular work to the Absolute as the continuity and unity of artworks.

Romantic criticism acknowledges the temporal character of its object. The particular artwork has an a priori finite existence and must do so in order to be an object of reflection. Romantic criticism legitimates the artwork by retroactively demonstrating its immanent formal tendencies. In doing so, criticism also legitimates its own task as the demonstration of the objective unity of all artworks in the idea of art. The particular artwork is not conceived of as a self-sufficient monad, but as a moment in the unfolding of the Absolute as the medium of reflection. At this point a danger is made manifest in the Romantic theory of reflection: that the particularity of the work is dissolved in the Absolute qua the medium of reflection. In order to grasp the epistemological significance and the possible danger within Schlegel’s philosophy it is paramount to grasp his theory of art, in particular his notion of the idea of art.

4.7 Schlegel’s Idea of Art

For Schlegel the task of a form of poetry that is universal would be the exhibition of the idea and, as such, this conception of the universal points to a notion of task. The task of criticism is to demonstrate the unity of art in a single invisible work, i.e. a work in which the idea of art and the work of art loses its distinction. Yet, Benjamin cites approvingly the concept of progress and idea at the heart of Schlegel’s universal poetry. The idea of a universal work of art as a task is open to the “modernizing misunderstanding” of the concept of progress that “consists in seeing endless progression as a mere function of the indeterminate infinite task, on the one hand, and the empty infinite of time, on the other.”¹¹⁷ For Benjamin, central to Schlegel’s conception of progress is not a process of

¹¹⁶ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism”: 143.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 168.

mere becoming, but an “infinite process of fulfilment”. The infinite in which this progress takes place is not conceived of as stages of successively superior cultural objects as in Rickert’s stages of culture, but the progressive unfolding of the idea in a more and more determinate form. Each individual artwork is a mere potential point at which the idea—the Absolute unity of all artworks—can be demonstrated. Criticism completes the artwork by intensive reflection, i.e. by raising it up through reflection to the Absolute. Criticism demonstrates the universal tendencies in the particular work and, in so doing, demonstrates the unity of art. Thus, in contrast to the empty progress characteristic of modernity, Benjamin locates a notion of ‘progredibility’ or potential for progress in the continual advance of poetic forms.

It is here that Benjamin comes closest to clarifying the Romantic concept of history not as empty striving towards the void, but as a process of infinite and continuous fulfilment. As John McCole puts it, “Considered as a medium of reflection, art is a coherent continuum of forms that progressively unfolds itself. This unfolding enacts an organizing motion towards ever greater articulation and clarity, and thus toward unity.”¹¹⁸ In this light, Benjamin describes the aim of Romantic criticism for Benjamin: it is “not judgement, but, on the one hand, completion, consummation, and systemisation of the work and, on the other hand, its resolution in the absolute.”¹¹⁹ At the highest stage of clarity criticism reveals the tendency towards universality in all particular works of art. Criticism realises the task immanent in all particular works of art—the realisation of the idea of art as the Absolute unity of all works of art. However, Romanticism also inserts a form of temporal mediation in their concept of critique. As something essentially incomplete, the particular work must be engaged with over time. The notion of the incompleteness of the particular artwork speaks to an element of contingency and potentiality inherent in every work.

The artwork’s immanent tendencies are not revealed in the bare fact of its existence, but become manifest in the course of its historical unfolding. The object is not fixed and eternal, but changes over the course of time. Since the critic and the object occupy relative positions within the same medium, critique itself must be immersed in the historical movement of its medium. This speaks to the character of both criticism and the object of critique: the critic takes a position external to his object at the risk of misconstruing the

¹¹⁸ McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*: 102.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism”: 159.

nature of both his method and the object it seeks to understand. While it is crucial for the Romantic immanent critic to begin from the particular in order to capture the universal tendencies within the particular work, it is equally necessary to realise that the particular object is not complete at a specific point in space or time. Rather, the particular work contains a number of ideal elements that are only revealed through continuous critical engagement. According to such a conception, the Absolute is present in a limited, but incomplete form within the particular work.

Where the critical aim of Romanticism seems to go wrong for Benjamin is when Schlegel, in his later works, “defines the absolute medium no longer as art but as religion” and as such can grasp the content of the work only in an “unclear way”.¹²⁰ If the aim of Romantic criticism was to win the autonomy of both its object and criticism itself, in subordinating the content of the work to an external concept, Schlegel risks destroying the immanent content of his object and along with its inherent contingency (and, therefore, potentiality). In other words, they surrender the autonomy of the unique sphere of art to the sphere of religion or politics. Benjamin again locates this problem when he states that the Romantics have no ideal of art, they could only achieve “the semblance of this through the accoutrements of the poetic absolute, such as ethics and religion.”¹²¹ Here it is possible to locate the chief problem of Romantic art criticism: in dissolving the content of the particular work in the Absolute, it has an inherent tendency to reduce the content of its object to the expression of an externally posited universal idea. Benjamin demonstrates this in another way when he addresses Schlegel’s conception of universal poetry. It is at this point that Benjamin charges Schlegel with “the old error of confounding ‘abstract’ and ‘universal’.”¹²² Schlegel’s aim was a noble one for Benjamin: to secure the idea of art from its misunderstanding as an abstraction from empirical artworks and to define his concept of the idea of art in a Platonic sense. In short, Schlegel aimed to make the idea of art the ground of all particular art works.

In making the idea of art manifest in the ideal individual work, Schlegel subordinates the content of a particular work into an individual invisible work: “It is this invisible work that takes up into itself the visible work.”¹²³ The intensification of reflection on the

¹²⁰ Ibid., 156

¹²¹ Ibid., 179.

¹²² Ibid., 167.

¹²³ Ibid.

individual work, which is supposed to lead through the progressive continuum of forms to the idea of art, leads instead to the unity of all works of art in an abstract and individual work. The Absolute, the continuity of all works of art that exceeds the particular work, is made manifest in the individual ideal work of art. By paradoxically positing the individual as the universal, Schlegel's conception of progressive forms becomes mystical. The Absolute is made manifest in a singular work, but one that is invisible, i.e. pure and transcendental. Thus, within the progressive Romantic continuity of forms a retroactively posited teleology subordinates the particular works to the lawfulness of the idea of which particular works are conceived of as a finite manifestation. The result is what Benjamin refers to Schlegel's "mystical thesis" that all art is one work. In making the Absolute manifest in the individual work, criticism subordinates its object to the positive process of critical reflection. By highlighting Romanticism's inability to define the content of art, Benjamin brings to light the central problem of Romanticism: the extinguishing of the plurality of artworks. In light of this, the importance of Benjamin's definition of the Romantic concept of criticism as wholly positive becomes clear, the positivity of the heightening of consciousness obliterates the "moment of self-annihilation, the possible negation in reflection."¹²⁴

In his essay on Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Schlegel points towards the destructive aspect of criticism: "We must rise above our own affection for the work, and in our thought be able to destroy what we adore; otherwise, whatever our talents, we would lack a sense of the whole."¹²⁵ The destructive element of Romantic criticism is essentially productive; it is the dissolution of the particular into the universal or the whole. Without the negative moment in reflection, the determinateness of the artwork is lost and the content of the work is seen as the expression of the idea. As Caygill writes, "[f]or Schlegel... critique will in time ultimately overcome the contingency present in the work by revealing all of its possibilities and thus converting them into necessities."¹²⁶ Here, Schlegel undermines the temporal rhythm of fulfilment that he introduced into his theory of progressive forms by positing the totality of reflective surfaces in the singular universal. The infinite process of fulfilment becomes subverted in the a priori positing of a singular universal that retroactively totalises the continuum of artistic forms in a virtual unity.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 152.

¹²⁵ Schlegel, "On Goethe's *Meister*": 273.

¹²⁶ Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*: 47.

The singular universal retroactively provides the abstract identity of all particular works of art in the idea. The temporal rhythm of progressively more complete and clear forms is frozen in the becoming of a singular universal as the absolute unity of all artworks. Perhaps, against Schlegel's own theory of progress, Benjamin cites approvingly his novel *Lucinde*: "What, then, is the purpose of this unconditioned striving and advancing without standstill [*Stillstand*] or centre [*Mittlepunkt*]?"¹²⁷ Here, Benjamin locates a negative and interruptive moment of standstill in contrast to what he describes as the unconditioned "ideology of progress". Against that interruptive standpoint, however, the Romantic philosophy of art risks dissolving the particular work into the medium of reflection by subordinating the particularity of the work to the productivity of criticism itself. Criticism fulfils the work by destroying the immanently negative content of the work: its elements of determinateness and contingency. As Benjamin states, "The Romantics wanted to make the lawfulness of the work of art absolute. But it is only with the dissolution of the work that the moment of contingency can be dissolved or, rather, transformed into something lawful."¹²⁸ For Benjamin, the Romantic conception of immanent criticism results in an ahistorical unity in the "absolute identity of the ancient and the modern—in past, present, or future."¹²⁹ The contingencies present in the particular work and its determinateness are dissolved in the making identical of the content of art and the idea of art.

The autonomy of the sphere of art is, therefore, achieved through the purification of the content of its object of criticism. For Schlegel the particular work of art "must be a mobile transitory moment in the living transcendental form."¹³⁰ The Romantics render the particular artwork into a contingent moment in the progressive unfolding of the continuity of forms. At the same time, however, they redeem this element of contingency through criticism, by resolving it into a mere moment of the eternal idea.¹³¹ Romanticism identifies the nature of its object of critique as something transitory, contingent and determinate, but, at the same time, seeks to cover up the profanation of its object by idealizing it, by rendering it eternal through criticism.

Romanticism must acknowledge the particularity of its object while also claiming that it is essentially a limited expression of the truth of the idea of art. The truth of the

¹²⁷ Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism": 169. [Translation modified]

¹²⁸ Ibid., 182.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 167.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 182.

¹³¹ Ibid.

particular artwork can only be guaranteed by removing the contingency of its content by subordinating it to the idea. It can only produce the thought of this truth retroactively and ideally since it is inherently lacking in its object. In this sense, we can say the task of Romantic art criticism is fulfilled, but at the cost of eradicating the content of art and the particularity of its object. In so doing Romanticism becomes a form of mystical positivism, hypostasizing its object of criticism in a transcendental individual object. Thus, while Benjamin sees some promise in the Romantic mode of criticism, it cannot form the basis of a form of materialist criticism. I will now conclude this section by providing a critique of the early Romanticism that sets the ground for Benjamin's materialist concept of criticism.

4.8 The Failure of Romantic Formalism

Much of the secondary literature on Benjamin's relationship to Romanticism emphasises the central connection between the Romantic conception of immanent criticism and Benjamin's own method. Nowhere does this aspect seem more obvious than in Benjamin's treatment of Novalis' philosophy of nature in the dissertation.¹³² This reading tends to dehistoricise Benjamin's reading of Romanticism that occurs, as he states, within "the problem-historical context" of post-Kantian philosophy. Against this, I have argued that the central problem of Romanticism is its tendency to subordinate its object to the productive act of criticism. If, as we have seen throughout this chapter, Benjamin insists on a method of criticism that can account for the particularity of its object, then Romantic critique fails in this task by dissolving the particular object into the productive act of criticism, the self-perfection of the Absolute. For Benjamin, the Romantic philosophy of reflection provides the point at which "the subject-object correlation is abrogated."¹³³ Romanticism undermines the subject-object relationship at the risk of dissolving the content of its object. While the dissolution of the subject-object relationship in the Romantic theory of reflection is certainly attractive, it is also potentially problematic. As Samuel Weber notes, in "German Romanticism there is a tendency... to subordinate the work qua individual phenomenon to the more general, generative power of the medium of

¹³² See, for instance, Hanssen and Benjamin's introduction to *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*. There, they write that "it was Novalis's mystical terminology which would exert a lasting fascination over Benjamin. Using terms such as 'experiment' and 'perception', Novalis's philosophy of nature revealed a theory of knowledge that successfully dissolved the rigid subject-object correlation."

¹³³ Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism": 146.

critical reflection.”¹³⁴ Benjamin accords to Romanticism a Democritean aspect in which perception entails “a partly material interpenetration of subject and object” there remains a trace of instrumentalism in the Romantic theory of art and its underpinning epistemology.

According to Benjamin, the epistemological core of the Romantic theory of art is derived from Novalis’ *Naturephilosophie*. As such, the Romantic tendency to dissolve the object’s particularity is evident in Novalis’ conception of the object as the grounds for the subject’s self-knowledge. This is the sense in which Benjamin refers to Novalis’ conception of observation as ironic: “it observes in its object nothing singular, nothing determinate.”¹³⁵ Ultimately, for Benjamin, observation speaks to an underlying unity “in all media”, i.e. the Absolute. The unity that is revealed is one that is subjectively produced in reflection. In getting nearer to the object and, finally, drawing it into herself, the observer grounds a form of unity that is absent in reality in her reflection. The lack of unity present in the world of things is revealed to be a unity within the observing subject—the centre of reflection. In both the realm of art and in nature, totality is not present immanently, but is something that must be produced reflectively in the subject. Romantic immanence does not solve this absence by finding the Absolute in reality, but locates a means by which totality can be subjectively produced.

It is at this point that Romanticism does not seem to provide an alternative to neo-Kantianism so much as its obverse face. In describing Novalis’ philosophy of nature, Benjamin states that “there is in fact no knowledge of an object by a subject. Every instance of knowing is an immanent connection within the Absolute, or, if one prefers, in the subject. The term ‘object’ designates not a relation within knowledge, but an absence of relation.”¹³⁶ Reflection on the object does not produce knowledge of the thing, but self-knowledge. As such, the object of knowledge is not an object in its particularity, but knowledge of the Absolute, the unity of subject and object, or what Benjamin refers to as a “reflectively produced synthesis”.¹³⁷

While Cohen would clearly criticise Novalis’ philosophy as a subject-oriented philosophy of being, it is on this point that Novalis’ comes closest to Cohen’s conception of a priori genetic thought. The truth of the object does not lie in its mere appearance, but

¹³⁴ Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s –abilities*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 63.

¹³⁵ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism”: 148.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

in an abstraction from its essence. The Romantic observer sees the object for what it really is: a mere moment in an Absolute unity. The synthesis that exists prior to the subject's reflection on the object for Cohen is produced retroactively within reflective consciousness for Novalis. A trace of instrumentalism can be detected here: the object is only meaningful as the ground for the subject's reflective self-knowledge. The unity of the subject and object of experience can only be produced in the absorption of the object's content into the reflective medium as a moment of formal and absolute unity. The idealisation of the object produces an essential unity between subject and object, but at the expense of the object's particularity. Just as the artwork is completed through the task of criticism, the singular object of experience is completed through its absorption into the centre of reflection through the process of observation.

The phenomenal world of transitory experience is given meaning in the reflectively produced ideal totality. Such a totality can only be achieved, however, by negating the determinacy and contingency of experience itself. The unity lacking in the world of things becomes a reflective unity produced in the observing subject. This is a merely subjective and ideal unity that stands against the very nature of the experience it seeks to resolve in the Absolute. When Benjamin speaks of Novalis' theory of observation as 'awakening' the object, it is in terms of bringing the object into consciousness. In other words, the implicit unity of the object in the subject's self-knowledge is what must be awakened. In contrast to Novalis' *magic observer*, Benjamin's intensive observer, discussed in "On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy", "finds that something leaps out at him from the object, enters into him, takes possession of him, and something different—namely, the non-intentional truth, speaks from out of the philosopher."¹³⁸ While there are surface similarities to Novalis in this description of observation, Benjamin also identifies an element in the object that negates the observer's attempt to fully absorb its objectivity into her consciousness. The negative aspect of the object is nothing other than its determinate content, something that stands over and against the subject's attempt to subsume it in reflection. Even at the extreme point of its synthesis into the subject, the object retains a negative trace of its determinateness and contingency that resists becoming fully subordinated. It is this essential element of *resistant objectivity* that Benjamin aims to conserve in the face of an idealizing tendency inherent in Romanticism. The truth of the object

¹³⁸ Ibid., 404.

cannot be found in its appearance as an extension of subject, but in the immanent content that fundamentally resists any attempt at such a subordination.

It is at this point that Rudolph Gasché locates Benjamin's estimation of the failure of Romanticism. As he states, Romanticism, "the Absolute—the critical concept *par excellence*—is not only not demarcated from the profane with necessary rigour, everything profane is drawn into the Absolute, polluting what, in principle, is to be kept pure of all alien ingredients."¹³⁹ I would not go as far as Gasché in identifying a notion of the pure transcendent Absolute with Benjamin's thought. Rather, it is in the Romantics' conception of the Absolute as something essentially open to critical reflection that allows Romantic criticism gains purchase on the present. Critical reflection on the incompleteness of the work opens up the possibility of a continuity between the traditionally opposed realms of phenomenal experience and the transcendent Absolute. Benjamin's Absolute is not the same as the neo-Kantian. It is not imposed on experience from the outside to provide meaning and significance. Rather, for Benjamin, the Absolute is indeed something that is present in a limited and incomplete form in various forms of our experience, such as our experience of the artwork, in the life of students and in language. It cannot, however, be embodied in the singular universal because truth transcends the individual object.

Romanticism fails in its attempt to overcome its object by positing its immanent reconciliation in the form of a singular universal. The positing of a singular universal brings criticism to a standstill by viewing its task as complete, not in the present, but in the form of an ahistorical and ideal virtual unity. Romantic criticism misses the mark when it idealises its object and, in this process, dissolves the object's particularity. Against the Romantic idealisation of the object and destruction of the contents of reality, Benjamin aims to maintain the integrity and particularity of the object and experience. At the same time, Benjamin also aims to account for the absence of the Absolute as an object of experience, i.e. the fundamental condition of modernity.

Implicit in Benjamin's reconceptualisation of the Absolute is the reorientation of the notion of the critical task. Criticism must take place within the temporal horizon of a work's determinate historical existence not through the imposition of a lawful formal character on the work's content. For Benjamin, the task of criticism remains incomplete and must remain so as long as the realisation of the essential unity of art remains a purely

¹³⁹ Gasché, "The Sober Absolute": 64.

ideal goal. The role of criticism is not to impose totality on its object. Rather, it aims to expose those implicit or unconscious aspects of the Absolute that are immanently present in the work. Benjamin must grant to the object's form of appearance an element of truth that stands against the formal tendency to subsume its particularity under the lawful and necessary idea. At the same time, Benjamin plays Romanticism off against itself by asserting the essential incompleteness of the idea subverting its tendency to make the idea totally manifest in the abstract individual.

In this chapter I have emphasised Benjamin's attempt to provide the ground of a concept of criticism that is attentive to both the expression of an idea and a determinate material content. In other words, I have stressed Benjamin's attempt to conceive of a form of criticism that does not view its object merely as an empirical fact complete in a specific place or time or the mere expression of an a priori idea. Romantic immanent critique seemed to provide fruitful grounds for such an approach, since it began from the individuality of the artwork as a limited manifestation of the idea. Ultimately, however, Romanticism succumbed to the tendency of idealizing its object, viewing it as the a priori manifestation of the Absolute idea or totality. For Benjamin, Romanticism dissolves the content of its object, seeing it as an idealised reflection of an already existing (subjective) unity. For Benjamin, the objectivity of things is imprinted in their material determinateness and particularity. While it is possible to say the Romantics legitimate their concept of critique it also must be asserted that they fail to legitimate the content of their criticism. Instead, they must look to the accoutrements of ethics and religion discussed above. Or, in other words, they must legitimate their concept of critique on grounds external to their object.

Benjamin's own concept of immanent criticism comes to engage with its object in the horizon of its historical and material specificity. He engages with the content of the work as a product of a specific historical epoch rather than as a manifestation of a timeless a priori or ideal truth. This leads back to the conception of the truth of a historical object or event as something that changes over time. It is here that it is also possible to locate the implicit aim of Benjamin's critique of the Romantic concept of criticism. It is not an attempt to dissolve the Romantic position into history by demonstrating the timeless truth of its method but, rather, it demonstrates the place of Romanticism within the context, both historical-material and intellectual, of the concept of experience discussed in the previous chapter. In other words, the Romantic notion of reflection and its concept of

criticism can be seen to represent conceptually the concrete condition of the concept of experience itself.

If neo-Kantianism rejects the very possibility of the existence of the Absolute in reality, Romanticism attempts to cover up its absence by making the Absolute immanent in a reflectively produced unity. As I have shown, this is unsatisfactory: by dragging the Absolute into every facet of reality, the Romantics strip it of its form-giving power. The Romantic Absolute comes to symbolise a form of experience in which the Absolute, unity and totality are absent. This is the very condition of modern experience itself, for Benjamin. The Romantic solution remains problematic insofar as it cannot address the conditions of that experience, but can only posit an immanent solution to the absence of the Absolute. It is not Benjamin's aim to cover up or find a solution to the absence of the Absolute, rather he examines the conditions under which this form of experience is made manifest. He does so through an examination of both neo-Kantianism and Romanticism, the two philosophies that, since Kant, have attempted to come to grips with the predicament of experience and its relationship to the Absolute. At this point, I will move onto the conclusion of this thesis where I conceptualise a materialist alternative to the impasse we find in both Romanticism and neo-Kantianism.

Conclusion: Between Empiricism and Idealism

I concluded the previous chapter with an examination of Benjamin's thesis on the German Romantic concept of criticism. I also strove to demonstrate what Benjamin viewed as the limits of the Romantic concept of criticism, specifically the inversion of its immanent tendency into a form of transcendence. In contrast to the transcendent aspirations of Romanticism, Benjamin aimed to maintain some aspects of their concept of criticism while rejecting the movement from immanence to transcendence. In their aspirations for transcendence, Romanticism comes dangerously close to the form of neo-Kantianism that I examined in the third chapter of this thesis. Despite radically different ways of conceiving of their object, both Romanticism and neo-Kantianism run the risk of dissolving the content that their method of criticism aims to examine. This danger, essentially the loss of the object both in its meaning and significance for a subject and the loss of its objectivity as such, represents the limit of Benjamin's Kantianism in both its Romantic and neo-Kantian forms. It is at this extreme point, the very limit Benjamin sees within the Kantian philosophy, that Benjamin comes to posit his materialist reorientation.

Benjamin's form of materialism does not one-sidedly reject Kantianism or idealism more generally, it necessarily results from his immersion in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. Benjamin's materialism is born out of idealism and, accordingly, it can encompass a form of idealism within itself. Benjamin's philosophical orientation differs from a neo-Kantian, such as Lange, who strictly separates materialism and idealism into their respective philosophical domains: materialism addressing scientific and epistemological concerns while idealism addresses issues of the spirit. Both Benjamin and Marx demonstrate the falsity of this conflict and provide some indications of how these two traditionally opposed philosophical positions can be reconciled at a higher level.

In this conclusion, I build on the discussion of the limits of both Romanticism and neo-Kantianism in the previous two chapters in order to demonstrate how Benjamin differentiates his materialist concept of critique from both the Romantic immanent and neo-Kantian transcendent approach. Throughout this thesis, I have claimed that in order to fully grasp the present actuality, a mode of thought that can think between the traditional dichotomies of empiricism and idealism is necessary.

Marx, I claimed in the second chapter, was one such thinker. From the mature Marxian perspective of *Capital*, ordinary sensuous things come to embody an invisible

substance—value—that transcends their determinate sensuous shape. The social essence of things is concealed in their immediate appearance and the phantasmagoric reality of capitalism confronts human beings as an alien objectivity. This form of objectivity is not a mistake of consciousness, something that can be dispelled formally. Rather, this inversion is real and it finds its confirmation in those objects that constitute the second nature of capitalist reality. To fetishise a commodity is to, in fact, fetishise something that is spectral and immaterial. At the same time, since the concept value necessarily appears embodied in a physical thing, the fetishisation of a spectral property takes the form of the worship of crude material objects.¹ The objectivity of the thing qua commodity is established not on the basis of its inherent or natural qualities, but on a socially determined quality—value. Put simply, this form of objectivity most prevalent within the reality called capitalism is a form of social validity. This signals that an object qua commodity is not purely the sum of its natural parts, but that the landscape of capitalist reality is composed of objects that contain within themselves an essential imprint of subjectivity.

In *Capital*, Marx frames the impasse any materialism that comes to be immediately identifiable with empiricism must face: how to account for concepts that transcend sense experience? Marx provides an account of historical genesis and his critique of political economy demonstrates the weakness of a standpoint that takes what is simply given as an ahistorical truth. For Marx, society is not a natural thing, it is the product of human action and social intercourse. Unlike Adam Smith, for instance, who saw commercial society as the rational outcome of human being's natural propensity for exchange, Marx's denaturalizes capitalist reality. The conceptual laws that govern this reality, the second nature of capitalism, are not natural laws. The law of value holds sway in reality, but is itself a product of history, not the expression of an eternal natural law. Despite this, under capitalism, the determination of value by labour time asserts itself in the same way that "the law of gravity asserts itself when a person's house collapses on top of him."² It is important that Marx compares the laws of capitalism, those socially objective and valid laws, to "regulative laws of nature". Society is governed by laws that confront the individual with the same force and validity as laws of nature. Individuals find the reproduction of their lives fully mediated by the commodity and money. Furthermore, social reproduction is, in

¹ David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*. (London: Haymarket Books, 2011), 130.

² Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, 168.

fact, not only the reproduction of the subject, but the capitalist totality itself. Economic crises are real. If producers cannot sell their commodities, if workers cannot sell their labour, then it is not a mistake of consciousness or a form of misrecognition. Rather, it is the brutal reality of capitalism made manifest in the experience of the individual. Social relations between people really do take on the character of thing-like relations between people and social relations between things. The fetish-character of society is not a mistake of consciousness or a form of misrecognition, it is real and this reality is continuously reinforced in the experience of individuals under capitalism. Therefore, it is not enough to simply stop at an understanding of the laws of society as natural laws. Marx goes beyond such an understanding by developing a notion of social objectivity that can account for the strange unity of the ideal and material aspects of concepts and ideas.

In making the genesis of concepts such an important aspect of his critique, Marx also points towards a notion of conceptuality that contains a material element; a material element that must be awoken through the process of critical re-cognition. Critical re-cognition demonstrates the conventional nature of society, its social constitution. The economic reality that confronts human beings under capitalism is placed in tension with the reality of first nature that really is regulated by immutable natural laws. While social laws appear as objective, their basis in human action must be demonstrated. There remains an essential scepticism about the validity and objectivity of economic laws that make him a materialist more in the Democritean sense than the Epicurean. Scepticism about convention, necessity and appearance are crucial to the operation of Marx's form of criticism.

Despite the acknowledgement that economic laws have are socially necessity and validity in reality, the reality that underlying the capitalist form of objectivity is the experience of exploitation, domination and human suffering. In treating economic laws as laws of nature, the social relations that constituted them disappear and the economic logic of capitalism appears invariant. For Marx, to reassert the human element within the economic reality of society, to decipher the historical and social origin of the socially objective and valid laws of economics, is essential to the task of criticism as he understands it. Or, in other words, it is the task of materialist criticism to critically re-cognise the relationship between concept and reality. The radical separation of thought and reality through the naturalization of concepts such as value, labour or class must be overcome.

Marx's materialist mode of criticism finds its antithesis in the idealism of Rickert and Cohen. Cohen's notion of origin is the antithesis of Marx's account. I will say more on that in a moment, but I would like to say a few things about Benjamin's critique of the Romantic account of immanence. It seems to me that Benjamin does not fit in cleanly with the tradition of immanent critique as it is commonly understood. Put simply, Benjamin is the odd man out in a tradition of immanent criticism that is said to begin with Hegel, then developed by Marx and finally made methodologically central in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critical theory.

The Limit of Romantic Immanence

The concept of immanent criticism or immanent critique has become a cornerstone of critical theory, yet this concept is remarkably under examined. Immanent criticism is defined in Ritter's *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* as "the judgment of historical epochs, cultures, literary texts and so forth 'according to their own standards'."³ While there are certainly aspects of this form of criticism in both Schlegel and Benjamin, this is not primarily what Benjamin or even Schlegel really means by immanent critique. Immanent critique is typically described as a form of criticism that "enters into its object" and reveals its immanent contradictions. That concept of criticism does not fully capture the concept of criticism for either the Romantics or Benjamin.⁴ For Schlegel, criticism raises the artwork to the Absolute, it makes the Absolute immanent. It is necessary, therefore, to take into account the double meaning of the term immanent. Not only does it refer to something within the bounds of experience, but it has a theological dimension as well. Immanence in its theological sense is the notion that the Absolute encompasses or is manifest in the empirical world. For the Romantics this double-meaning was significant: not only did they examine the immanent qualities of the object, but through critical reflection they attempted to raise the object to the Absolute. In this light, it would be an

³ Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer and Gottfried Gabriel (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie: Volume 4*. (Basel, 2007), 1292. Quoted from, Gordon Finlayson, "Hegel, Adorno and immanent criticism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 22, no. 6 (2014). Many thanks to Gordon for allowing me to use his translation.

⁴ See David Harvey, "Introduction" in *Sociological Perspectives* 31.1 (1990), 5. The orthodox view that immanent critique enters into its object in order to reveal its immanent contradictions is put forward well by David Harvey in his introduction to a special issue on critical theory in the journal *Sociological Perspectives*.

error to simply lump Benjamin in with the Hegelian tradition of immanent criticism that emerges from Adorno and Horkheimer.

Benjamin's critique of Romantic immanence is a critique of their notion of immanence itself. In the Romantic attempt to locate the immanent Absolute, they legitimise the content of their critique in an idealised form external to the object. For Benjamin, immanent criticism is not so much the demonstration of arbitrary contradictions within the object of criticism, but a demonstration of the absence of the Absolute, totality and unity. Romanticism fails to do justice to its object precisely because it claims to make the Absolute immanent. In doing so, as I have shown, the content of the work is made subordinate to an external idea. As we saw in the previous chapter, one of the chief dangers Benjamin saw in the Romantic approach to the object of criticism was the potential dissolution of the content of critique. For Benjamin, the Romantics purified the content of their object at the expense of its particularity and, in so doing, embraced a form of mythical formalism that was positive and productive of the unity that they found lacking in the artwork and ultimately reality itself. This is the point at which their form of criticism became merely productive. Criticism becomes a form of art, but a form of art with only an ideational content, not a material one.

Against the formalism of the Romantic mode of criticism, Benjamin maintains the negative and materialist elements of critique by retaining the artwork's immanent historical and experiential content. For Benjamin, criticism must engage with its content over time in order to bring out, as it were, the relationship between the work's idea and its immanent material content. In contrast to Romanticism, the idea expressed in the work is not external to the work itself, but the idea of its origin. Rather than locating the idea of art as something eternal and lawful to which all works must correspond, Benjamin locates in the particular work of art an expression of its particular historical orientation. This is referred to as the work's 'afterlife', something that is not only embedded in the work itself, but also in the history of its critical reception. For Benjamin, this does not reveal that the work obeys an eternal, almost natural law, but that the aim of criticism is to reflect on the work and, in doing so, reveal the contingency and potentiality embedded within in its particularity. It is the contingency and potentiality that inheres in the material determinacies of every particular work of art that legitimises the work of criticism and its task. The task of criticism is not to subsume the entirety of its content under a great natural law, but to demonstrate the element of potentiality imprinted in the finite historical being of its object.

In its material particularity the work exists as a finite autonomous object, complete in a particular place and time. However, the work's meaning and significance is something essentially incomplete. This aspect of the work is something that is unfolded over time through continuous critical engagement with the work's content. This conception of the work speaks to its resistant objectivity in the face of attempts to subordinate the work's existence and its content—its objectivity—to a manifestation of an a priori idea.

Benjamin's approach to criticism does not fixate on its object. There is a sense in which the work is complete in-itself, but, at the same time, the work points beyond itself to a speculative horizon of possible potential configurations. In its objectivity work is irreducible to a set of empirical facts or qualities. The truth of the work is neither the manifestation of an a priori idea or a set of empirical facts that can be deduced purely immanently from the work. In Benjamin's 1931 text "Literary History and the Study of Literature", Benjamin points to a historical understanding of a work that goes beyond this dichotomy between abstract idealism and material empiricism:

What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them—our age—in the age in which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not reduce literature to the material of history is the task of the literary historian.⁵

Criticism is not conceived of as a methodological progression that converges on an abstract and external conception of truth or idea, but a continuous engagement with the work over time. Benjamin inserts a temporal and historical dimension into the heart of the idealist conception of the artwork or historical event thus transforming its conception of the idea or truth. Each critical engagement with a work re-cognises the work and, in doing so, brings it into a relationship with the present. The truth of the work or event is not fixed temporally in an idealised past or a messianic future, but must be located within the materialist horizon of the present.

Benjamin's reorientation of criticism away from the ideal to the material does not, however, consist of the empirical reduction of the work or event as a body of meaning that is complete in the space and time of its creation. For Benjamin, criticism must take place continuously so long as the task of criticism remains incomplete. That task, as defined by the Romantics, is the realization of an ideal or virtual totality of works. In light of this, Benjamin's own examination of Romanticism seeks to evaluate the efficacy of their task.

⁵ Benjamin, *Selected Works: Volume 2, part 2: 1931-1934*: 464.

This task is incomplete so long as the unity they found in art is absent from experience. For Benjamin, Romanticism fails to address the central problematic raised in post-Kantian philosophy: the problem of continuity between knowledge and experience or the problem of the continuity between reality and the ideal. Despite its immanent tendency, the Romantic form of immanence is ultimately unsatisfactory. The Absolute, the ideal, is reflectively produced, but it remains divorced from experience in the ephemeral sense. Romanticism, just like neo-Kantianism, does violence to the particularity of experience in making it subordinate to a reflectively produced idealised Absolute. In contrast, Benjamin aims to disrupt the purely symbolic or virtual totality of works produced within the Romantic form of criticism.

For Benjamin, the continuity of criticism must be disassociated from an empiricist notion that the work is complete in a specific place and time or the abstract idealist notion that critique takes aim at an Absolute totality that is completely external to the work or works themselves. Literary works form an organon of history—a body of work that is continuous, but not in the Kantian or neo-Kantian sense of progressing towards an ideal point. Works of literature, along with the tradition of post-Kantian philosophy itself, represent a body of knowledge that requires continuous critical engagement. Benjamin aims to perceive the relationship between this body of knowledge and “the problem-historical context” of our age. In bringing the text into a material relationship to reality—to our age—Benjamin is able to locate continuity between the text and our historical juncture. Not the smooth continuity of progress, but one that demonstrates the incompleteness of the work and the task of criticism itself. Benjamin does justice to the objectivity of works, their intrinsic meaning and significance, while also grasping that the continuity of works as an organon of knowledge that transcends their finite particularity.

Benjamin posits the continuity between critical knowledge and the object of critique without, as in Romanticism, positing an identity between the process of criticism and the artwork. The artwork retains its autonomy, its objectivity. Continuity rather than methodological progression, in other words. The incompleteness of the work is central to Benjamin’s writings after his dissertation on Romanticism. Baroque allegory will provide a potential antithesis to Romantic symbolism and its idealizing and totalizing tendency. However, in its need to provide totality externally, Benjamin points towards the implicit acknowledgement of the incompleteness of the work for Romanticism. The Romantic yearning for totality, synthesis, unity and the Absolute is a reality that they could only find

in art. The danger of Romantic subjectivism is given a good gloss by Georg Lukács in *Soul and Form*:

A seemingly deliberate withdrawal from life was the price of the Romantic art of living, but this was conscious only at the surface, only within the realm of psychology. The deep nature of this withdrawal and its complex relations were never understood by the Romantics themselves and therefore remained unresolved and devoid of any life-redeeming force. The actual reality of life vanished before their eyes and was replaced by another reality, the reality of poetry, of pure psyche. They created a homogeneous, organic world unified within itself and identified it with the real world.⁶

The withdrawal from life, from the actual, from reality, is a danger that Benjamin perceives not only in Romanticism, but neo-Kantianism as well. Cohen's messianism rested on the realisation of a new actuality radically counterposed to the existing reality. In the same way, the Romantic theory of history runs the danger of withdrawing from the existing actuality to the purely subjective and aesthetic domain of art. In contrast, Benjamin maintains the integrity of the actual—its meaning and significance—through a conception of critique that must continuously engage with its object—as an objective body of knowledge—in relation to 'our age'. In doing so, he maintains a productive tension between the ideal and the real, the point at which his form of materialism and criticism come to emerge.

Ultimately, Benjamin's critique of both neo-Kantianism and Romanticism represents a fundamental alternative to their conception of history and the method of conceptualizing it. I have, throughout this thesis, made the case for a materialist reorientation of the Kantian theory of history and concept-formation in Benjamin's critical engagement with those works. I have also endeavoured to show how the Marxian understanding of capitalism challenges the traditional conflict between material empiricism and abstract idealism. It is my hope that I have achieved the goal of providing an understanding of an alternative tradition of materialist thought.⁷

⁶ Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock. (London: Merlin Press, 1974), 50.

⁷ Both Marx and Benjamin challenge Cohen's conception of a purely logical origin. I will aim to further develop this tradition in future writings. This tradition problematises traditional philosophical conceptions of immanence and transcendence. Specifically, I would like to examine the red thread of materialism throughout Benjamin's thought, particularly in relation to his account of allegory. Allegory represents an obvious counterpoint to the Romantic account of the symbol, yet there are elements of Romanticism, in particular its inability to adequately account for a unity of artworks, that implicitly points towards an account of allegory. In the future I would like to examine Benjamin's later thought through the critique of empiricism and idealism I have developed here.

I am currently completing an article that examines the symbol from an epistemological perspective in the work of Kant and Hegel. In the future, I would like to expand this work to encompass Benjamin's critique of the romantic symbol found in the *Trauerspielbuch*. I would also like to develop a more explicit account of the possible affinities and contradictions within the Marxian and Benjaminian accounts of history and the relationship between concepts and reality. I have begun this process by examining Marx's account of the money-form and his use of the concepts of symbol and sign. This thesis will provide a solid foundation onto which this future research can be built.

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