Abstract: This paper challenges the hitherto common distinction between Hermann Cohen’s early phase of Völkerpsychologie and his later phase as a critical idealist. Recently, it has been claimed that Cohen’s turn was not a rapid conversion but a development that was already inherent to his early view. This paper argues that even in Cohen’s mature critical idealism, a thin basis of Völkerpsychologie continues to exist. Cohen’s critical programme is presented as having a twofold aim: On the one hand, it strives to give an account of pure, formal, and logical laws that regulate critical thinking; on the other hand, it offers a reading of Kant’s dualism between matter and form that allows critical thinking to be seen as inevitably embedded in causal laws of psychology, history, and physiology. Concerning the latter, the paper argues that Cohen remained in the tradition of Völkerpsychologie in his mature ethical thought.

Introduction

Hermann Cohen did not always advocate an antipsychologistic and critical Kantian position. The young Cohen started his academic career in psychology, specifically the Berlin school of Völkerpsychologie (VP), before developing a Kantian philosophical system of the possibility of scientific cognition. It is common to differentiate between Cohen’s early psychological phase and his later phases as an antipsychologist, critical, and Kantian philosopher (Sieg 2003). Lately, however, there has been an increased interest in VP and Cohen’s early phase that sheds new light on his intellectual development (Beiser 2018; Edgar 2020; Kusch 2019; Reiners 2020; Steizinger 2020). Egbert Klautke has shown that VP “left its mark” on a wide range of academic fields in the nineteenth century (Klautke 2013, 2). Scott Edgar has argued that Cohen’s development from psychologism to antipsychologism was not a “rapid conversion” but a development, which was—at least to some extent—already inherent to his early view (Edgar 2020, 255). In this paper, I take a step further and show that Cohen even incorporated elements of VP in his mature ethics (1907–1910). This view challenges the standard classification of the alleged ‘völkerpsychologische’ early phase followed by a critical phase, and instead suggests interpreting Cohen’s mature ethics in light of VP.
I first outline the standard classification of Cohen’s intellectual phases, which I shall criticize. In the early years, influenced by Moritz Lazarus (1824–1903) and Heymann Steinthal (1823–1899), Cohen advocated a broadly Herbartian position, which he built on the ‘apperception’ thesis. According to this thesis, concepts contain a history and imagery that give them their meaning. For Lazarus and Steinthal, the perception was not a passive but an active undertaking of the mind, relying on unconsciously “compressed” contents (verdichtete Inhalte) that shape our thinking (Kusch 2019, 254). VP then seeks to decompress, hence reveal the underlying stories and meanings. In this context, the young Cohen investigates the origins of myths, the idea of gods, and other concepts in a causal manner to trace back their psychological and historical roots. Later, however, he advocates a method that rejects a causal view of norms, ideas, and concepts and draws on transcendental logic to investigate the formal conditions of experience. In his mature philosophy, most notably in *Die Logik des reinen Wissens* (1902) and *Die Ethik des reinen Willens* (1904), it seems *prima facie* striking that Cohen was more concerned with the ‘pure’ and formal side of cognition. Since Cohen argues for a normative and ideal concept of experience constructed by objective, hence scientific and moral judgements, he seems to be rather unconcerned with causal explanations of cognition. A detailed examination of his ethical works, however, paints a different picture.

I suggest that we interpret Cohen’s mature ethical view on history as a combination of the principles of critical idealism and elements of VP. I argue that Cohen’s critical method has a twofold aim: On the one hand, it strives to give an account of pure, formal, and logical laws that regulate our critical thinking; on the other, it attempts to overcome Kant’s ahistorical, antimaterialism, and antipsychologism by viewing critical thinking as being inevitably embedded in causal laws of psychology, history, and physiology. Thereby, I argue that Cohen adopts a view, which comes remarkably close to the *völkerpsychological* positions of Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal—the most prominent leaders of VP. To underpin my claim, I focus on the general tendencies of VP that are apparent in Cohen’s mature ethical idealism. The purpose of this paper is to offer a systematic guide to situate the causal aspects that deviate from critical idealism. For reasons of space, however, I will not provide extensive textual support.

My argument develops in four steps: First, I show that in 1869–71, Cohen defends a ‘strong’ programme of VP that views transcendental philosophy as a supplementary method to VP. Second, I argue that Cohen breaks with the ‘strong’ programme in 1877 when he commits himself to a normative notion of experience. By drawing on the ideal moral law and historical “conditions of culture” (Cohen 2001, B286), Cohen sets the foundation of his mature idealism with a “dynamic” interpretation of the “A priori” (Luft 2015, 54; Friedman 2001). Although Cohen does not give up his Kantian position, he
draws more attention to causal, deterministic, and natural aspects, in which the ‘pure will’ unfolds itself. Third, I argue that Cohen includes the following elements of a weak programme of VP in his mature ethical thought: an emphasis on free will; the concept of motion in historical processes; and a critical view on a dialectic conception of history. By doing so, he offers a moral foundation as an evaluative criterion to judge ideas in history. Fourth, I argue that the systematic resemblances provide good reason to reconsider Cohen’s relation to VP in his mature ethical idealism. The “Antisemitsismusstreit” of the early 1880s, which was why Lazarus and Steinthal broke ties with Cohen, might be why Cohen decided not to contextualize his philosophy within this tradition. Finally, I summarize the main arguments of this paper and give an outlook on potential research questions that might emerge from this study.

Völkerpsychologie and Transcendental Critique in the Years of 1869–71

My argument unfolds by focusing on Cohen’s interpretation of ‘form’ and ‘matter’ at different stages of his development. In this section, I argue that Cohen’s early intellectual phase goes hand in hand with a view on form and matter that does not question the empirical conceptualization of logical forms. The young Cohen viewed VP and deductive critique as two different methods that “are necessary complements to one another” (Edgar 2020, 263). This section aims to show that Cohen could only hold onto this view because he advocated a “strong” programme of VP in his early years, which was restricted to a causal explanation of belief content (Kusch 2019, 251) and excluded the formal investigation of cognition. In opposition to Cohen’s early method of VP, I introduce selected works of Lazarus and Steinthal and present an alternative programme of VP that aims to include explanations based on free-will causation and “normative interests” in their psychological investigations (ibid.).

The young Cohen views Kant’s transcendental critique as a philosophical discipline that deals with the logical possibility of the formal conditions of cognition. The scrutiny of the formal conditions of experience is not yet concerned with the material and psychological basis of transcendental subjectivity. Prima facie, it seems plausible to assume that Cohen’s shift to transcendental philosophy marks a crucial turning point in his development. However, a detailed investigation of his stance on form and matter suggests that in Kant’s Theorie der Erfahrung (KTE), Cohen still holds onto a distinction that matches the view in his early psychological writings. To underpin my view, I focus on “Poetische Phantasie” (2012a [1869]); “Mythologische Vorstellungen” (2012b [1869]); and KTE (1987 [1871]).

In “Poetic Phantasy and its Mechanism,” Cohen investigates the “conditions of poetry as a psychological process” and argues that even poetic
elements of language such as metaphors were once generally accepted true beliefs (Cohen 2012a, 350). Cohen develops his account of aesthetics in opposition to two notions: First, against Friedrich Theodor Vischer, who argued in *Aesthetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen* (1857) for an idealist foundation of aesthetics. Second, against Henry T. Buckle’s historicist explanation of poetry, presented in *The History of Civilization* (1857). Cohen argues that ‘poetic contents’ (*Dichtungsinhalte*) come into existence when a hitherto true belief proves to be false. Even in the post-Copernican age, for example, the expression “the sun goes down” remained in our cultural memory as figurative speech (Cohen 2012b, 430). A belief once considered true turns into a metaphor when it loses its ascribed value of truth. The picture Cohen draws is the following: an external object—explained differently at different stages of human development—stimulates our senses. VP is not concerned with the legitimacy of these explanations. The foundation on which we decide if a concept is true requires a philosophical or (at this stage of his development) a metaphysical investigation of the evaluative basis. VP investigates the “mechanical laws” of the conceptual and psychological necessity of ‘compressed contents’ (*verdichtete Inhalte*) caused by sensory input (Cohen 2012a, 386).

Suppose an unknown sensory input is merging into a new concept. VP calls this process “apperception.” If, for example, I see a table and recognize it as such, I subordinate the sensory input under a category that was “apperceived” at an earlier stage (387).

The method based on the apperception thesis, which includes efforts to lay open compressed contents, becomes even more evident in Cohen’s “Mythologische Vorstellungen.” In this article, Cohen reconstructs a possible case in which early peoples (*Urmenschen*) “apperceived” the concept of gods. The early peoples observed lightning hitting trees, which, as a result, started to burn. Since they knew that grinding ash trees causes a fire, they inferred that the clouds in the sky must have the same function as the ash trees on earth. This hypothesis is underpinned by the shared linguistic roots of the Indo-Germanic concept of “cloud” (*Wolke*) and “ash tree” (*Esche*) (Cohen, 2012a, 404).

Further, the early peoples inferred that some beings in the sky, gods, rub the sticks and cause the fire on earth. Hence, the “apperception” of gods came into being when this was the best explanation for the natural phenomenon in question (Cohen, 2012a, 406). According to Cohen, not only myths but also scientific progress can be explained based on the apperception thesis. The task of science is, according to Cohen, to produce concepts that are free from any subjective “elements of sensation” and replace them with non-ambiguous and objective concepts (418). Since non-formal language based on “sound patterns” is always “poetic” to a certain extent, Cohen argues that science needs to refrain from non-formal language (437). Mathematics—the formal language of science—is liberated from aesthetic and subjective elements.
Thus, scientific progress appears to be a development where subjective descriptions based on sensations yield objective and formal explanations of natural phenomena.

Cohen did not claim, however, that VP was the only method that could explain cognition. Metaphysical investigations of logical reasoning based on transcendental and deductive logic are a legitimate discipline on their own in Cohen’s view. To depict the distinct features of this discipline, he illustrates the difference with the following example. An empirical or psychological law—the subject of VP—is violated if a concept is used inadequately: “If I see a tree, I must recognize it as such even if I don’t want to” (Cohen 2012b, 387). Since psychology is only concerned with the truth value of concepts, VP does not differ between “physical” and “mythical” laws (401). “Metaphysics,” on the other hand, is concerned with true logical principles (445). Cohen upholds in his early intellectual phase the idealist view that “perpetual truths” in epistemology and ethics are based on “platonic ideas” (445). Although he does not clarify this thought further, this shows that VP is merely concerned with the emergence of substantive concepts that originated in prior times. However, the task of metaphysics is to investigate the foundation of theoretical and normative reasoning to identify principles that allow for logical inferences. Thus, the young Cohen believes that VP and metaphysics do not mutually exclude but rather “complement” one another (Edgar 2020, 263).

It remains unclear at what moment exactly Cohen gave up the view that there were two epistemological methods. When Cohen turns to KTE, one might think that despite his openness towards idealism and metaphysics in his early psychology, Cohen may have lost his interest in psychology once he turned over to Kantian philosophy. However, the following paragraphs suggest that he worked out KTE with the idea to focus on the complementing (and hitherto missing) discipline: The metaphysical foundation of cognition.

During the “epicrisis of a new era” (Köhnke 1986, 168), that is, at a time when the intellectual aftermaths of the 1850s ‘materialism controversy’ (Materialismus-Streit) were still noticeable, and neo-Kantianism was on the rise, a skeptical view towards the metaphysical implications of Kant’s theory was widespread. Early neo-Kantians like Friedrich Albert Lange tried to correct materialism with Kantian philosophy (Lange 1870). In metaphysics—including Kantian metaphysics—Lange saw an outdated discipline that needed to be replaced by the methods of natural sciences (Lange 1870, 254–55; 2015, 254).

In contrast to Lange, Cohen, who was convinced of deductive reasoning as a legitimate philosophical method, saw himself confronted with the task of setting transcendental philosophy apart from examining empirical knowledge. To prove the legitimacy of transcendental philosophy, Cohen defended the following principles: First, the Kantian categories are not arbitrary and operate on a different level from that of the natural sciences. The purpose
of the “transcendental logic”—even though it starts with a “metaphysical
deduction”—is to offer a formal framework of logical principles that are ap-
parent in judgements and explain the possibility of rational thinking (Cohen
1987, 110–11). Second, transcendental philosophy deduces the necessary and
constitutive forms of experience: “The apriority of the categories compares
to the apriority of space and time. We first presuppose them as basic concepts
(Stammesbegriffen), and then they are being intensified (vertieft) as forms of
experience” (ibid.). Third, transcendental philosophy is concerned merely
with the “internal” conditions of experience (128). Critical philosophy is, at
this stage, not yet concerned with the empirical and external conditions of
knowledge, but only with the transcendental principles of subjectivity. By
accepting the metaphysical implications of Kant’s method, identifying the
categories, and focusing on the internal and subjective elements, Cohen’s early
view differs fundamentally from his late view that starts with the historical
facts of science.\footnote{In defining transcendental philosophy as being concerned
merely with the “internal,” formal, and antimaterialistic conditions of logical
thinking, the transcendental method refrains from an empirical and historical
starting point to discover the “formal character of the intellect” (128). But
since the \textit{transcendental} method differs so fundamentally to VP, what reasons
do we have to believe that Cohen held onto a two-fold methodology in KTE?

First, there is a \textit{systematic} reason to believe that Cohen defended a two-
fold methodology. Precisely because the young Cohen strictly separates these
two disciplines, they can complement each other. VP examines truth-neutrally
and causally the empirical formations of knowledge manifesting in concepts,
ideas, metaphors, and myths. Metaphysics or the transcendental method, on
the other hand, seeks to discover the evaluative aspects of truth by investigat-
ing the a priori principles that constitute experience. A coherent connection
of these two methods is possible because Cohen interprets the distinction of
form and matter as two separate issues that each require their methodology.
Martin Kusch’s observations on the late nineteenth-century VP support my
interpretation. Kusch has recently argued that the young Cohen belongs to
the “strong program” of VP, which includes “methodological neutrality and
symmetry; causal explanation of beliefs based on causal laws; a focus on
groups, interests, tradition, culture, or materiality; determinism; and a self-
referential model of social institutions” (Kusch 2019, 251).\footnote{This shows
that VP’s “strong” programme captures only causal explanations of knowledge
and, thus, does not interfere with his early Kantian view.}

Second, there is a \textit{historical} reason to believe that Cohen did not give
up on the material form of knowledge once he focused on \textit{KTE}. In 1869 and
1877, Cohen showed great interest in the material aspects of knowledge. Had
he lost interest in the material side of knowledge in between, \textit{KTE} would
appear as a rather unusual exception to his earlier and later philosophy.
Moreover, Cohen published his first commentary on Kant only two years
after his articles on VP. If we consider the preparation time for this book, Cohen would have undergone an extremely quick change of heart only to let later go with it. Cohen does not focus on psychology in KTE because he is merely concerned with transcendental philosophy. We find textual evidence in “Zur Controverse”—an article that was published in the same year as KTE. There, Cohen argues that the history of philosophy is based on a “psychological method,” which is excluded from his critical thoughts on space and time (Cohen 1871b, 292). Thus, it is more plausible to assume that Cohen held onto a two-fold methodology that accepts VP as a co-existing method to Kant’s transcendental critique until 1871.

Cohen’s two-fold epistemology, however, does not come without problems. While VP is based on the view that all concepts can be explained causally, the critique of knowledge assumes that the formal ideas of the transcendental deduction are excluded. But if all linguistic elements are products of a historical discourse underlying psychological laws, does this not also apply to (Kant’s) philosophical concepts of transcendental philosophy? To provide a solution to this problem, Cohen has to give up the view that there are two different yet complementary methodologies that allow for a material and a formal investigation of cognition based on two methods.

To prove that Cohen incorporates elements of VP in his mature ethical thought, I first show that Cohen’s view of VP, which is reduced to causal explanations of contents, covers only one strand of VP. Alongside the “strong” programme, Kusch identifies a “weak” programme of VP characterized by “the blurring of explanatory and normative interests; an emphasis on freedom of the will, and antirelativism and anti-materialism” (Kusch 2019, 251). By focusing specifically on Lazarus’ and Steintal’s conception of the ideas in history, I now introduce elements of the weak programme in Lazarus’ *Das Leben der Seele* (1858), *Über die Ideen der Geschichte* (1863), and Steintal’s *Universale Ethik* (1885) that show systematic similarities with Cohen’s mature ethics.

Lazarus claims that the “origin” of language needs to be explained by the laws of “apperception” (Lazarus 1884, 14). As Lazarus puts it, the apperception thesis in epistemological processes assumes a two-way connection of mental and physical activity. The mind is “receptive” as it grasps sensual inputs from the environment, and it is “productive” as it incorporates new information by drawing on earlier apperceived concepts (32). On these grounds, Lazarus differentiates “simple sensations” such as the recognition of “red or blue, sweet or bitter, tone A or C” from more complex and abstract “apperception” processes—like the idea of an absolute union—that require a prior set of knowledge (38–39). Lazarus applies this line of thought to actions by differentiating “unintentional” acts that merely cause “noise” (reflexes) from “intentional” speech acts, where physical matter is brought willingly into “motion” for communication purposes (59–60). By drawing on Johannes
Müller’s physiology, Lazarus emphasizes the possibility of bodily movement caused by nature and free will (98; Müller 1838, 268). In Über die Ideen in der Geschichte (1863), Lazarus focuses on the concept of “motion” to emphasize free will in actions. Even when we describe actions retrospectively in history, free will is to be viewed—at least partially—as a cause for physical body movements, human actions, and normative ideas (Lazarus 1863, 32). By criticizing the merely “mechanical” and deterministic method of the historical sciences that undermines the free agent, Lazarus aims to show that ideas are also a product of actions based on free will (13–14). Despite the influence of “geographical, physiological,” and “economic” affairs in historical processes, he ascribes a great deal to “psychological processes,” including moral ideas, that are caused freely and promote progress in the “history of mankind” (32). The history of ideas is then to be viewed as a cumulation of “self-motions” (Selbstbewegungen) (ibid.), meaning that mental states are, on the one hand, expressed in language and therefore inevitably determined by history and physiology, and, on the other, determined by a free will. Ethical and scientific ideas in history, which are responsible for the progress of humanity, thus involve a free cause despite their causal determination.

What follows from the concept of free causation of ideas in history is a criticism of Hegel’s unfolding idea of freedom in history. Lazarus rejects the alleged “dictatorial power” of Hegel’s speculative and dialectical method (38). Hegel’s philosophy of history, which in Lazarus’ view dogmatically presupposes a superior force that stands on its own, would not sufficiently consider the fact that it takes natural forces—subsumed to causal or “mechanical” laws—to realize internal free ideas (53–54). Lazarus believes that we necessarily develop a teleological perspective when judging objectively. In ethics and science, Lazarus argues, we necessarily presuppose a concept of the ‘absolute’ or the idea of ‘coherent unification.’ By doing so, we recognize an individual case or token subsumed under a general abstraction, idea, or type (77–82). In ethics, the idealized concept of absolute union opens the view on free human actions to differentiate “objectively” between morally good ideas (that are coherent with the idea of universality) and ethically wrong ideas that lead to conceptual contradictions (83).

Although Lazarus rejects a “transcendental” view of ideas (66), he defends an account that comes close to Kant’s theory on synthetic a priori judgements: “We cannot know the absolute, but we have an idea of the absolute,” which allows gaining moral knowledge (84). That Lazarus tries to incorporate a Kantian understanding of transcendental ideas in his programme of VP becomes evident when he claims that “space, magnitude, logical relations, and moral norms” are explainable with our psychological “nature” (87–88). Moreover, Lazarus reminds one of Kant when he differentiates between “passionate” motifs and “pure” motifs in actions (89). “Psychological
analysis”—just like transcendental philosophy—is supposed to keep them apart and to “conserve the pureness” of moral “ideas” (89).

By contrast, Steinthal is more straightforward in adopting a Kantian view in *Universale Ethik* (1883). Though with a much stronger emphasis on the variability of moral norms over time, he explicitly accepts the following aspects: a Kantian monotheistic view of the absolute (God) that justifies a logical system of moral norms (Steinthal 1885, 10); a compatibilist view of history that allows for a mechanical *and* a normative perspective on laws that co-exist coherently (19); and (more in Jewish-messianic than in Kantian terms) an account of the progress of humankind as a development caused by “free human beings” (ibid.). Steinthal suggests using the “moral law,” or the principle of “human dignity,” as a guiding principle for evaluating ideas in history (20; 23). Although we have only recently found the terminology to grasp the fundamental principle in morality, Steinthal argues, humans would have always “carried the original idea inside them” (65). Kant, however, was setting the foundation, which allows for a differentiation between the “material” and the “intellectual” elements of ideas in history (66). Even though moral “acts” (*Taten*) that appear in history follow *nolens volens* causal laws, they are based on a “free will” (73). As a defender of VP, Steinthal is aware that moral deliberation draws on empirical concepts deeply interwoven with cultural conventions and norms. Despite all this, however, he does accept an a priori moral foundation that underlies moral ideas caused by free wills in history.

I have shown that VP need not necessarily be restricted to a ‘strong’ programme as Cohen defends it in his early years. The young Cohen maintains that VP is a deterministic, neutral, causal, empirical, and material examination of concepts of cognition that is to be kept separate from the transcendental, formal, and deductive critique. However, Lazarus’ and Steinthal’s ‘weak’ version of VP combines causal and normative perspectives on ideas. By doing so, they incorporate causal and logical elements, a natural and free cause explanation of ideas, and an ethical view into their psychological programme. Further below, I will show that we find similar features in Cohen’s mature ethics. But first, I show that Cohen went through a fundamental change in *Kant’s Begründung der Ethik* (1877) (KBE) when he adopted a *dynamic* conception of the a priori.

Cohen’s Turning Point in Kant’s Begründung der Ethik

In KBE, Cohen lets go of the view of VP as a complementary discipline to transcendental philosophy. Cohen’s conceptual change may be summarized as follows: From now on, Cohen advocates a purely regulative understanding of the conditions of experience and builds on a concept of natural and normative reality created through scientific and ethical reasoning. Cohen argues that judgements in “science” and “culture” deliver the substantive and empirical
content of reason, which are “given in books and became true in history” (Cohen 2001, A27B35). By adopting a normative concept of experience that starts from a historical foundation of objective judgements, Cohen gives up the idea that the distinction between form and matter would justify two different methods. The formal basis of knowledge does not require a distinct approach. He now views a priori principles as apparent in the empirical formation of objective judgements in science and culture.

Interpreters have tried to find reasons for Cohen’s rather sudden change. For Sieg, Cohen’s early phase appears as a “riddle” (Sieg 2003, 261). Peter Schulthess argues that August Stadler’s influence on Cohen is responsible for his turn (Schulthess 2012). Edel emphasizes Lange’s influence on Cohen to explain Cohen’s transition from psychology to critical philosophy (cf. Edel 1998).

I argue, however, that the incompatibility of the hitherto advocated concept of experience provided Cohen with a systematic reason to give up a ‘mechanical’ view of nature and replace it with a ‘dynamic’ notion of the a priori (Luft 2015, 54; Friedman 2001). As I will show in the following paragraphs, in 1877, Cohen gives up on the assumption that a priori categories and ideas are to be deduced regardless of their material formation and are to be seen as elements unfolding themselves in the historical judgements of science and culture.

Cohen’s transformation of the form-matter distinction is based on his rejection of the Kantian “method” (Cohen 2001, A24B32). Whereas in KTE, he accepted the metaphysical assumptions preceding the transcendental method, Cohen now criticizes “Kant’s depiction” that would suffer from an insufficient separation of the “transcendental a priori” and the “metaphysical a priori” (ibid.). In contrast to his earlier view, Cohen is now seeking a notion of experience that allows one to take the empirical appearances of objective judgements as a starting point. This way, Cohen argues that the transcendental method determines the “possible experience from the conditions of experience” without agreeing on metaphysical assumptions (ibid., A25B33). Transcendental philosophy is not about constructing an empty metaphysical “scaffold” filled with empirical content (ibid.). Instead, a priori forms of judgements appear in the practice of objective judgements. Against his earlier view, Cohen criticizes Kant’s conceptual use of “basic concepts” (Stammbegriffe) as being misleading (ibid.). He argues for a “functional” view of transcendental principles to determine the a priori aspects of objective judgements (A27B35; Edel 1998, 37). Science and normative judgements are practices based on synthetic a priori judgements striving for a coherent and logical union. By basing transcendental philosophy on the facts of ‘culture’ and ‘science,’ Cohen rejects—at least to some extent—sensible experience and offers a teleological or normative reading of Kant’s system.
Secondly, Cohen’s shift is noticeable when we look at his view of the thing-in-itself. Beiser claims that Cohen “eliminated” the thing-in-itself already in the Trendelenburg-Fischer debate (Beiser 2018, 75). Beiser, however, is correct only insofar as Cohen eliminates a metaphysical reading. The thing-in-itself, however, remains a crucial methodological concept marking the “limit of experience” (Cohen 2001, A35B43). As a “limiting concept,” the thing-in-itself functions as a “helping tool,” which is a necessary condition of an idealized concept preceding the scientific practice (A36B45). By viewing the concept of a coherent union as a functional ideal, Cohen offers a normative or teleological view of culture and science that determines the task for objective and synthetic judgements in culture and science.

According to Cohen, the ideal notion is essential for deductive and inductive inferences. In both cases, synthetic judgements would rely on the practical idea of a coherent whole (A65B77–78). Cohen’s argument can be reconstructed with the following syllogism:

P.1 All humans are mortal.
P.2 Cajus is human.
C. Cajus is mortal.

According to Cohen, the crucial part of this syllogism lies in ‘all,’ which is a necessary and ideal component that deviates from observable objects. This idea is crucial for further inferences. Because the “idealized universalization” is an essential part of any syllogism, Cohen concludes that deductive reasoning is genuinely based on synthetic a priori judgements (A65B77–78). The same goes for inductive inferences. If we want to infer other propositions, we necessarily presuppose a unified idea to infer truths for individual cases. Now, consider the following empirical premise:

P.3 Every human observed so far is mortal.

Strictly speaking, we cannot infer from this premise truths for an individual case, such as that Cajus, a human, is mortal. To make this premise epistemically valuable, we need to add the functional idea of unity:

P3. Every human observed so far is mortal; thus, all humans are mortal.

We assume that the observed cases pertain to all human beings; hence if we undertake an idealized generalization, we operate with a premise that allows us to infer further principles. In other words, for Cohen, observed facts need to be idealized if we want to draw inferences from empirical observations.

According to Cohen, even the empiricist John Stuart Mill saw this problem, which is why he claimed that inductive reasoning necessarily relies on an “axiom” of generalization (A63B76). What Mill misunderstood in Cohen’s eyes, however, is that this “axiom” would mark the shortcomings of empiricism. Because inductive inferences are based on ideas beyond what
we perceive, we would have to accept that synthetic reasoning necessarily relies on idealism; thus, empiricism is wrong.

The same applies to the ethical foundation of judgements in culture. Cohen—convinced that objective moral judgements are possible—claims that if we deliberate about the rightness or wrongness of an action-guiding norm, we rely on an idealized, absolute concept, which is the end-in-itself. It is the task of transcendental philosophy to investigate this idea and offer a formal concept that is free from subjective elements. Indeed, Cohen believes that Kant’s moral law does come remarkably close in defining the fundamental moral idea that governs our ethical deliberation. However, Kant’s justification of the moral law fails because it relies too heavily on materialist, psychologist, and metaphysical terminology and fails to see the epistemological value of the moral law. By declaring the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends and the Formula of Humanity as the most important formulations of the moral law, Cohen offers an anti-materialist, anti-relativist, and genuinely social interpretation of the moral law. Cohen’s reformulation goes like this: “Every human being is [. . .] a member of the Kingdom of Ends and must be regarded as an end-in-itself” (Cohen 2001, A246 B279–80). Another formulation he provides runs as follows: “No human being may be used only as a means. Everyone in the administration of a moral world must always be considered at the same time as an end-in-itself” (ibid.). By offering a purely ideal formulation of the will, Cohen deduces the ideal concept of a free society that we necessarily and inevitably presuppose when judging objectively and morally.

In the preceding paragraphs, I tried to show that Cohen introduces a normative notion of experience based on an ideal generalization. This change marks a break in Cohen’s systematic development. Indeed, Cohen does not yet pay much attention to the “material” side of critical philosophy (Cohen 2001, B182). KBE aims to justify an epistemological foundation that does not rely on sensual experience. And yet, by basing his methodology on the ‘fact of historical science,’ Cohen clears the path for his mature view, where these elements play an essential role. Whereas in the first edition of KTE, Cohen still accepts sensations as the starting point and content of experience, he rejects sensual experience as a methodological aspect in his epistemology. He argues for an ideal concept of experience. Reality is not what we sensually perceive but the intelligible result of what we ‘construct’ if we reason objectively (Luft 2015, 54; Falkenburg 2020, 132).

Neither Stadler nor Lange made Cohen change his early conception of experience that fundamentally changed his methodological approach. Given his aim to justify ethics as an epistemological discipline, Cohen had a systematic reason to renew his view on content and matter and replace it with a normative and dynamic notion of the a priori sensitive to the causal formations of knowledge. However, if there is an autonomous will that produces new content, we must identify them in history: A task Cohen is concerned about in his mature ethics.
This section aims to show that in Cohen’s mature ethics, we find crucial aspects that resemble Lazarus’ and Steinhall’s weak VP programme. In *Ethik des reinen Willens* (ERW), first published in 1904 and followed by a second edition in 1907, and in the second edition of *KBE*, published in 1910, Cohen now draws more attention to the “historical formations” of the “pure will” (Cohen 2001, B410). Beiser too has recently claimed that the second chapter in ERW would originate in VP (Beiser 2018, 236–237). In contrast to Beiser, however, I do not believe that Cohen advocates the programme of his early years. With this new emphasis on the “narrative elements” of the pure will (Wiedebach 2006, 87), Cohen’s ethics comes remarkably close to the programme of VP advocated by Lazarus and Steinhall. Briefly summarised, Cohen argues here for a free-will perspective on ideas in history, a concept of “motion” that captures actions based on a free cause, and an *ethical* evaluation of historical ideas. The “pure will” is yet another concept standing for an idealized community of free wills, which Cohen views from now on as the “ideal concept of the state” (Allheit). 10 According to Cohen, this ideal concept allows us to evaluate ideas in history by opposing substantive regulatives to the ideal community, where all rational and human beings are universally seen as ends-in-themselves (1981, 5). Cohen’s most crucial aim is to answer a question previously raised by Lazarus and Steinhall: What is the fundamental basis that allows us to view the history of free ideas from a moral perspective if historical ideas are substantive and therefore necessarily entangled in natural causes?

Like Lazarus and Steinhall, Cohen tries to prove that contemporary physiology and psychology do not contradict a Kantian notion of free will. Cohen shares a common ground with Lazarus when he refers to Johannes Müller’s *Handbuch der Physiologie des Menschen* (1838) to argue for the coexistence of natural and free causation. According to Cohen, it is not the physiology of the nerves that creates the “content of sentiments (*Empfindungen*),” which causes physical bodily movements, but rather a mental image accompanied by experience (Cohen 1981, 156): “This is the path of real scientific idealism. It is not the stimulant but the condition of consciousness that is prior to the stimulant. [. . .] This condition [Anlage des Bewusstseins] constitutes the foundation of our psychology” (Cohen 1981, 156). Likewise, Lazarus explicitly draws on Müller to emphasize the priority of mental images in bodily movements or actions: “Not only feelings, also perceptions and mental images are responsible for organic effects” (Lazarus 1872, 95). Both Cohen and Lazarus value Müller’s physiology precisely because of his psycho-physiological account, allowing for a notion of free causation based on an immaterial basis. A similar thought is to be found in Steinhall.

By differentiating between a “dogmatic” and a “logical” conception of god, Steinhall argues for a Kantian view of the concept of the absolute
that allows for a logical deduction of duties: “It is the philosopher’s task to investigate the strict logical concept of god and to determine the legitimacy of this concept, whereby it is required to connect the logical and the warm predicates of religion” (Steinthal 1885, 10). Steinthal argues for a coherent coexistence of mechanical and normative laws regarding ideas in human history (19). A compatibilist view that engages in the physiology of the time alone may not be sufficient to draw a line between Steinthal/Lazarus and Cohen. However, if we look at the relevance of the free will’s emphasis, a different picture emerges.

By emphasizing the free will in historical processes (most prominently in chapter 7 of ERW), Cohen rejects the concept of historical “development,” which was first defended by Hegel and undermined an ethical perspective. Cohen criticizes the naturalistic view of social relations in contemporary sociology, namely Herbert Spencer’s The Social Organism (1860) and Albert Schäffle’s Construction and Being of the Social Body (1878). The problem he identifies with these accounts is that their concept of historical “development” would presuppose “basic elements” of social relations within a community (Cohen 1981, 40). This is problematic because while they investigate changes and developments in culture, they draw dogmatically on presupposed elements that cannot explain deviations (ibid.). Cohen thereby does not deny the relevance of sociology, but in “ethics, the sociological approach must not serve as a precondition” (Cohen 1981, 41). Cohen criticizes that all psychological and sociological approaches depending on a purely causal, backward-looking, and deterministic view of human culture. Instead, he argues that political and religious ideas in the present and the past originate in the pure will. In other words: These accounts fall short in explaining concepts that promote human progress in history.

Like Lazarus and Steinthal, Cohen uses the concept of “motion”—in contrast to the idea of “development”—to signal that cultural product rely on the idea of free will (40). To offer a methodology that allows for a formal evaluation of ends, Cohen argues against the idea that actions in history are merely empirical “deeds” (ibid.). Even though they inevitably adopt empirical ends in hindsight, they need to be traced back to a free cause to make them epistemically and normatively evaluable. The concept of “self-motion” ought to mark the idea of free will in historical processes (133). Human history is treated justly if it is considered not as a “natural” development, but rather as a will-based development created by humanity (39). This is reflected in chapter seven that deals with the free will at different stages of the history of humanity (283ff). There, Cohen is not concerned with the critical foundation of the free will but rather with the “history of ethics” that puts “the problem of freedom in the foreground” (238). As Lazarus and Steinthal base ethics on a free will basis that justifies historical developments, Cohen tries to show accordingly how the idea of freedom played out in the history of humanity.
By viewing the moral law as the normative basis on which to evaluate ideas in history, Cohen develops an argument against Hegel, which is reminiscent of Lazarus’ and Steinthal’s conception of history. Like “weak” VP that was presented in the section before, Cohen rejects Hegel’s conception of history for its alleged dogmatic, speculative, and schematized method that fails to take human actions and an ethical point of view into account. By now, many interpreters have pointed out that Cohen—despite his merely critical treatise on Hegel—approximates a Hegelian view (Kim 2015; Bienenstock 2012; Gibbs 2000; Willey 1987). Whether Cohen’s view on Hegel is justified is an interesting question, but it is one I cannot address in this paper. My aim instead is to show that in Cohen’s critique on a dialectic conception of history, we find another similarity to Lazarus and Steinthal. They built their concept of history on a very similar criticism of Hegel’s speculative method. Against Hegel’s statement: “The rational is real, and the real is rational,” Cohen defends the formal moral law—or the “ideal state” (Allheit)—as evaluative criteria for the ideas in history (Cohen 1981, 332). Cohen tries to avoid subsuming all human actions, undertakings, and ideas to the dialectical power of historical reason. It is not that a “hidden plan” of reason unfolds itself in history, but rather that the moral law is the normative basis on which to judge these ideas (28). Lazarus as well rejects a dialectical view on history that is focused too much on the empirical formation of contradictions rather than on the idea of the good that governs historical development: “The power of the idea may be a force of the good, but it is a blind force. We not only take the end, but also the way, thus, not only the [empirical] success, but the process in an ideal manner” (Lazarus 1872, 35, emphasis added).

For Cohen, these systematic resemblances emerge in an ethical view on history. This means that only since Kant offered the basis for the moral law, which allows us to differentiate between moral and immoral ideas, do we have the terminological and methodological basis to view history under the concept of an ideal community governed by the state. According to Cohen, the methodological concept of the ideal state “first needed to be discovered” before it was possible to grasp “the problem of history as a scientific [hence moral] undertaking” (Cohen 2001, B498–99). Kant missed, in Cohen’s view, that the moral law was the formal foundation for ethical, legal, and historical rationality. Hence, by drawing on elements of VP, Cohen broadens the realm of ethical reasoning. History is neither free from natural causes nor limited to rational and free ideas. The philosopher’s task is to entangle the pure and autonomous ideas and judge those ideas’ moral and political relevance by the moral law that is the ideal state: “The state is the lighthouse that guides the history’s path” (Cohen 2001, 503). The moral, political, and ideal conception of the state is the “sheet anchor” in the “floods of history” (ibid.). Likewise, the historian needs to refrain from a merely causal method of history. It is the
historian’s task to rely on the philosophical foundation of the moral law and to offer a narrative that allows for an ethical judgement of the ideas in history.

Did Cohen Remain a Völkerpsychologe?

In the previous section, I have shown the following similarities between Cohen’s ethics and the ‘weak’ programme of VP proposed by Lazarus and Steinhthal: Although historical norms are inevitably embedded in causal norms, the concept of “motion” emphasizes the free will in historical processes; the dialectical historical approach is criticized for undermining a moral perspective on historical ideas; and Cohen argues for a philosophy of history on a Kantian moral foundation. But despite all this, it seems that there is also good reason to exclude Cohen’s mature philosophy from the tradition of VP. First, Cohen explicitly distances his philosophical explorations of the pure will from VP for its limited approach. Second, Cohen does not commit to the “apperception” thesis, which is undoubtedly the most distinctive aspect of VP. Third, Cohen does not even mention Lazarus or Steinhthal in his mature ethical philosophy. The question then arises: Why can we and, more importantly, why should we reconsider Cohen’s mature ethical thought in light of VP?

The first objection dissipates if we look closely at how Cohen defines VP: “What has been done in the name of Völkerpsychologie, is restricted to language, mythos, and morals” (Cohen 1981, 11). Cohen rejects only the causal, deterministic, and neutral method or the “strong” programme of VP to investigate the material manifestation of cognition. Thus, Cohen argues here against the view to which he was committed in his early years; this, however, is no rejection of a “weak” programme in itself.

The second objection raises a more fundamental problem. Cohen presupposes a purely logical system, which requires deductive logic and therefore a different methodological basis than psychological explorations based on the apperception thesis. Although both approaches use explanations based on natural and free causation, one might argue that indeed it does make sense to differentiate these two approaches on the mere fact that Lazarus’ and Steinhthal’s positions are psychological undertakings. Cohen, on the contrary, offers a logical and critical investigation on a transcendental basis. As Hernán Pringe has argued, one of Cohen’s chief aims was indeed to prevent his idealism from having “any independent or additional psychological meaning” (Pringe 2017, 12). A systematic analysis, as I have tried to provide in the sections above, shows, however, that Lazarus, Steinhthal, and Cohen do find a joint meeting point: Lazarus and Steinhthal, on the one hand, accept a thin basis of absolute idealism by acknowledging that there are ideas—such as moral and scientific unity—that we necessarily presuppose in scientific reasoning. Cohen, on the other hand, reopens his philosophy of pure thought to psychological, physiological, and historical facts by reconsidering the Kantian distinction of form and matter. Pure thinking cannot be investigated without empirical
concepts; by basing the idealist system of scientific and normative judgements on an empirical and historical foundation, the transcendental foundation becomes evident in the process of critical and ethical thinking. In his mature philosophy, he commits to the idea that the explication of reason depends on physiological movements and linguistic concepts that rely on physiological laws and historically formed concepts. For Cohen, ideas in history are based on an autonomous will and depend on natural causes exceeding the realm of transcendental philosophy. Thus, even though Cohen does not commit to the apperception thesis, he tackles the issue from the transcendental-idealistic side and thereby comes systematically close to the weak programme of VP.

But since Cohen was undoubtedly aware of the wide range of *Völkerpsychologie*, what prevented him from discussing their work? One reason to answer the third objection might be that, at that time, it was not common to cite contemporary work. Although Cohen was undoubtedly influenced by Paul Natorp (his closest interlocutor)—for example, in respect of his theory of virtues—Natorp is not mentioned even once in Cohen’s mature ethics. When it comes to Cohen’s relation to Lazarus and Steinthal, however, another socio-political dimension might explain Cohen’s hesitation to engage with VP: the “anti-Semitism controversy” (*Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*), which led to a break between Cohen and his teachers.

As is well known, Cohen, Lazarus, and Steinthal all contributed to a controversy initiated by the anti-Semitic essay “Our Prospects” (1879) penned by Heinrich von Treitschke. Prior to the controversy, Cohen was highly respected by his teachers, Lazarus and Steinthal, who maintained a friendship even after he had left Berlin. His early articles were all published in *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*—a journal edited by Lazarus and Steinthal. However, when Cohen decided to answer Treitschke’s anti-Semitic and chauvinistic piece, the friendship between Cohen and Lazarus came to an end. In his response, Cohen argued explicitly against Lazarus’ suggestion to refrain from an essentialist view of nationality and claimed that German Jews should assimilate to German culture—a view Treitschke shared (Cohen 1880). He even made excuses for his old Jewish teacher, Heinrich Graetz, who resisted assimilation (Beiser 2018, 116). Whereas Cohen wished to calm the situation by emphasizing that a fruitful German-Jewish culture also required a rapprochement from the Jewish people to Germanism, he promoted precisely the opposite. Not only did Treitschke see in Cohen’s approval of a culture of assimilation a concession to his view, but also Lazarus—shocked and disappointed by Cohen’s standpoint—drew from their friendship. Later, Cohen realized that he had misjudged the situation. Although he knew that he did not sufficiently consider how his view might be conceived in such an anti-Semitic environment, it was already too late to repair the damaged friendship.
It would be understandable if Cohen, as a result, was not especially keen
to contextualize his philosophy within a philosophical tradition dominated
by intellectuals who had broken ties with him. Even if Cohen consciously
had a weak programme in mind while working on the physiological and
psychological, and historical entanglements of the pure will, it may have been
a deliberate choice on his part to prevent his mature system from labelling
the völkerpsychological elements as such.

Summary
In this article, I have tried to show that the common distinction between
Cohen’s psychological and anti-psychological phases fails if we recognize
that some elements come close to a weak programme of VP in his mature
ethical thought.

First, I have shown that Cohen started with a strong version of Völk-
erpsychologie, including a truth-neutral method that explains substantive
materialistic concepts causally and in a deterministic manner. In his early
years, Cohen held the view that a strong version of VP complemented critical
philosophy. Second, I argued that Cohen changed his view no later than 1877,
in his first edition of KBE by basing synthetic a priori reasoning on the facts
of science and culture. Third, I showed that Cohen developed this argument
further in his mature ethics. With an emphasis on free will, the concept of
motion in historical processes, a critical view on the empirical formation of
dialectic history, and an ethical foundation as an evaluative criterion with
which to judge ideas in history, Cohen included weak elements of VP in his
mature ethical thought.

This study has only focused on one aspect of Cohen’s mature philosophy
to reveal its resemblances with VP. Although I hope to have established that
there are aspects that we can reconsider in respect of Cohen’s view on history
in völkerpsychological terms, my interpretation leaves open the question of
how far-reaching this interpretation is. Supposing that similar parallels in
his mature works in epistemology, aesthetics, and his philosophy of religion
are found—a task for future research—we might have reason to think of his
‘homecoming’ to Völkerpsychologie more fundamentally.

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Notes

1. I am grateful to Martin Kusch, Lydia Patton, Scott Edgar, Charlotte Baumann, Henriikka Hannula, Niels de Haan, the participants of the workshop *The Era of Neo-Kantianism*, and the anonymous reviewers of *Idealistic Studies* who have helped me to improve this paper.

2. Interpreters sometimes use the translation ‘folk psychology.’ Since it is more common to stick with the German word, I will use the original name, *Völkerpsychologie*. Sometimes I will use the abbreviation ‘VP.’

3. This distinction might irritate some Cohen scholars who are less familiar with the VP debate of the nineteenth century, since Cohen refers to VP only in a ‘strong’ sense. However, as Klautke points out, one of the core aims of Steinthal’s and Lazarus’ work was to merge the causal and deterministic explanation of knowledge “with the idea of universal progress” (Klautke 2013, 4). Although one could say much more about the Jewish elements—especially about the concept of the “future” (Fiorato 2006)—in Lazarus, Steinthal, and Cohen, I bracket this topic here.

4. I am grateful to an anonymous referee of *Idealistic Studies* for raising this concern.

5. Renz (2021) and Patton (2005) point out that Cohen sets out his philosophical stance on history already in “Zur Controverse zwischen Trendelenburg und Fischer” (1871). However, as in KTE, Cohen does not yet combine transcendental philosophy with history.

6. I do not elaborate on all of Kusch’s aspects since his aim differs from mine.

7. From a contemporary Kantian perspective, this might appear questionable. R. Lanier Anderson argues that, for Kant, conceptual derivations from sensory experience are possible and presuppose the concept of matter to conceptualize the sensations of colors (Anderson 2015, 338). However, it would be unjust to treat the accounts of VP merely from a contemporary perspective. Their merit was to draw on essential insights of German sensualism without neglecting the rich tradition of German idealism. Neo-Kantianism is rather to be understood in light of the psychologism debate of the nineteenth century (Anderson 2007; Kusch 1994).

8. For a detailed discussion of the relation of the metaphysical and critical a priori, see Gianna Gigliotti’s reconstruction of Cohen’s methodology (Gigliotti 2006).

9. Charlotte Baumann has recently claimed that Cohen does not fully give up on sensations in his mature philosophy of science (Baumann, 2009). While this is true, it does not challenge his position as a constructive realist.


11. Adolf Trendelenburg also criticized Hegel in his *Logical Treatise* (1862) for not sufficiently considering the notion of “coming-into-being” (*Werden*)—a different label of motion—in his logic (Trendelenburg 1870, 28–29). I agree with positions claiming that Trendelenburg was influential for Cohen (Beiser 2014, 12; Poma 1997).

12. For a more detailed discussion, see Peter A. Schmid’s “Hermann Cohen’s Theory of Virtue,” where he deals with the foundational basis of virtues in Cohen’s philosophical system.
13. For primary sources of all intellectuals who engaged in this controversy, see Walter Boehlich (1965). For a detailed discussion that is not restricted to Cohen, see Sieg (1994, 147–53).

**Bibliography**


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