Marburg neo-Kantianism:

The Evolution of Rationality and Genealogical Critique

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Introduction

The Marburg neo-Kantian school is widely acknowledged as a precursor to analytic philosophy.

Consisting of philosophers such as Friedrich Albert Lange (1828-1875), Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), Paul Natorp (1854-1924), Rudolf Stammler (1856-1938), and Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), their anti-metaphysical and purely "critical" interpretation of the Kantian principles provided important ideas for Rudolf Carnap (Damböck 2017). Their approaches also laid the groundwork for the so-called "continental-analytical divide"—a division that traces back to a debate that emerged between Ernst Cassirer, advocating for the analytical side, and Martin Heidegger, representing the continental side (Truwant 2022, Friedman 2000). Recently, however, scholars have paid increasing attention to their *historicization* of rationality (Edgar 2022, Kinzel 2021, Clarke 2021, Biagioli 2021, Pecere 2021, Renz 2021). This particular aspect piqued the curiosity of genealogical thinkers within the continental tradition, who otherwise tend to approach idealist and rationalist interpretations in the Kantian tradition with skepticism. The aim of this chapter is to introduce and delineate the fundamental characteristics of the Marburg school's evolutionary perspectives on rationality. By doing so, it seeks to clarify how genealogists, despite

their reservations towards Kantian rational idealism, were intrigued by the neo-Kantian tradition.

Genealogy is a philosophical method aimed at uncovering the historical origins of normative beliefs that reinforce or stabilize problematic power relations. This method proceeds descriptively but is not value-neutral: With its intended aim of making the reader reassess their values, it seeks to correct the readers' belief or value system. 'Classical genealogists'—henceforth referring to Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault—rest on *four* pivotal assumptions.[1] Firstly, agents are considered to take contingent beliefs as objectively true, unwittingly bolstering practices that uphold prevailing power dynamics. The goal of the genealogical method is to challenge and erode these power structures by unveiling the historical origins of these beliefs. Secondly, at the heart of their critique lies a radical rejection of idealism, encompassing notions like "universality," "objectivity," "absolutism," or "apriority." While these notions are taken as logical and ahistorical terms in Kant and post-Kantian traditions, genealogists harbor skepticism about their potential *ideological* role. Thirdly, classical genealogists abstain from devising normative principles. Their intent is to foster an awareness of the contingency of morals. Lastly, classical genealogists typically align themselves with a form of materialism. By focusing on the material manifestation of norms, they uncover ideological components rooted in contingent factors that reinforce and contribute to problematic power relations.

Prima facie, Kantian transcendental idealism appears incompatible with the philosophical method of genealogical critique. Nonetheless, Nietzsche and Foucault both held an appreciation for the neo-Kantians. Nietzsche read Lange's main book, *The History of*

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[1] In The *German Ideology*, Marx seeks to unveil the ideological roots of the divine portrayal of the feudal state in Hegel (1845-6/1969, 25). Similarly, in *Genealogy of the Morals*, Nietzsche critiques entrenched Christian moral beliefs' historical origins (1887/2013, 4). In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault employs genealogy to challenge "teleologies and totalizations" (Foucault 1969/2010, 16).

Materialism, which he described as "a real treasure-house," shortly after its publication in 1865, during the early stages of his career. In a letter to Hermann Mushacke, he writes:

> The most meaningful philosophical work that has appeared in the past ten years is undoubtedly Lange's *History of Materialism*, about which I could write a ream of panegyrics. Kant, Schopenahuer, and this book of Lange's—I do not need anything else. (Cited after Hill 2003, 6-7)

Nietzsche's enthusiasm for Lange is also reflected in the *Genealogy of the Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil* in which he advocates a philosophy as "psychophysiology"—a thought clearly tracing back to Lange as we will see further below. However, Nietzsche was not the sole genealogist to engage with the works of the Marburg neo-Kantians.

In the article "Une histoire restée muette," published in 1966 in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, Foucault conducted a review of Cassirer's *Philosophy of the Symbolic Forms*. Despite Foucault's programmatic inclination to critique modern practices established in the name of rationality, his discussion of Cassirer goes beyond portraying him solely as a "symptom" of the "inability of Western thought to overcome Kant." Foucault cherishes Cassirer's approach of showing "how Kantianism, to which we seem to belong," came into being (Foucault 1966). While Foucault refrains from asserting any claims of progression, his appreciation for Cassirer's sensitivity to the historical emergence of philosophical concepts suggests an interpretation where Cassirer takes a step forward in the evolution of thought.

To comprehend how these prominent critics of Kantian and post-Kantian traditions could maintain a positive perspective on the Marburg neo-Kantians, a more comprehensive exploration of their historicization of rationality is essential. The Marburg School emerged during a period marked by the peak of historicism, scientific materialism, and historical materialism. On one hand, they aligned with this contemporary trend, asserting that not only the content of normative principles but also the *forms* of thinking would undergo change over time. In this regard, they aimed, as Natorp articulated, "to overcome the dualism between...

matter and form" (Natorp 1911/1986, 65). Driven by their conviction that all concepts, including logical and philosophical ideas, were inevitably embedded and shaped by scientific and cultural discourses, they argued that only through a critical engagement with substantive concepts could insights about the conditions of knowledge be attained.

However, despite their interest in the material manifestation of reason, the Marburg neo-Kantians were not content with a purely materialistic worldview. Although their investigations rooted in the "facts" of science and the social world, their perspective remained idealistic. They posited that the concepts with which we apprehend reality were rationally constructed (Luft 2015, Falkenburg 2020), and, in this vein, they endeavored to identify elements that are inherently presupposed in all rational practices aimed at acquiring knowledge. They believed that to understand how (moral) knowledge originates, one overarching notion underpins all knowledge acquisition: the idea of unity. This concept lacks empirical validation but subtly guides our scientific and ethical reasoning, providing a foundation for an understanding of objectivity that facilitates insights into the natural and social realms. To reconcile these two contrasting positions—the historicization of knowledge and transcendental idealism—the philosophers of the Marburg School established the groundwork for critiquing historical developments, which in turn attracted the interest of Nietzsche and Foucault.

The chapter unfolds as follows. Firstly, I present the viewpoints of Lange (section 2), Cohen (section 3), and Cassirer (section 4). In section 5, I further underscore four shared characteristics within this school: (i) a teleological foundation of rationality, (ii) a concept of ideology grounded in naturalism and relativism, (iii) a hermeneutical method that interprets social practices from an ideal standpoint, and (iv) the aim to provoke a critical standpoint toward existing practices. These ideology-combatting attributes, I argue, offer insight into why the Marburg tradition captured the attention of classical genealogists.

Friedrich Albert Lange: The Struggle for Survival and the Evolution of Humanistic Ideals

Lange is renowned for his publication, *The History of Materialism* (1866/1870). The book garnered considerable attention during his era and remains even today a foundational work for those intrigued by the history of what is now referred to as "physicalism" (Stoljar 2021). Additionally, Lange focused on the evolution of morals, a subject he explored in *The Workers' Question* (1865/1870) and *J. St. Mill's View on the Social Question* (1866). In these works, he formulated a theory of human progress inspired by the amalgamation of Darwinian and Kantian principles.

> It is only in the last centuries that principles of humanity have gradually arisen, which have eliminated abominations, but the business of destruction of nature has thereby only taken on other forms among men. These forms, however, are milder than in earlier centuries. (1866, 7)

Lange employs a teleological interpretation of history, positing that human history can be understood through the lens of the evolutionary "struggle for survival." Capitalism and socialism represent just the latest iteration of this phenomenon.

Before going into Lange's theory of the evolution of morals, it is important to gain a better understanding of his theoretical philosophy. Lange's philosophical framework draws significant influence from physiologists Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894) and Johannes Müller (1801-1858). In his work, *The History of Materialism*, Lange contends that Kant's inquiry into the conditions of the possibility of experience is indeed pertinent. However, he believes that the advancement of nineteenth-century physiological and psychological knowledge necessitates a naturalistic renewal of Kantian theory. In light of the novel insights from physiology and psychology, Lange seeks a "psychophysiological" justification for the transcendental conditions of experience (2015, 288). According to this position, knowledge is grounded in the *natural* organization of our consciousness.

Rather than relying on Kant's method of rigorous deductive reasoning, Lange advocates for empirical studies to understand the conditions of the possibility of experience. By conducting experiments using inductive reasoning, Lange aims to identify the *physiological* conditions that make our experiences possible. While Lange approached the study of knowledge as based on a posteriori claims, he asserts that gaining insights into the quality of these conditions would still allow for judgments of necessity in a Kantian sense.

Lange's empiricist justification of necessity is directed against the scientific materialists of his time. He critically highlights that, on one hand, materialists assert that scientific objectivity would be solely grounded in "inductive logic" (Czolbe 1855/2012, 136). Simultaneously, they would hold that natural laws were necessary, as exemplified by the assertion that "a stone, lacking support, will always and forever fall towards the center of the earth" (Büchner 2012, 186). Lange argues that this position is inherently contradictory. On one hand, materialists vehemently denied the existence of necessity claims, yet on the other hand, they claimed that the laws of nature were necessary (Widmer 2022, 261f). According to Lange, the materialists face two alternatives: They could either embrace the empiricists' standpoint that knowledge is hypothetical and thereby reject necessary judgments, or they could relinquish their radical empiricist view and endeavor to explain how judgments of necessity are possible (Lange 2015, 265). Lange himself adopts the latter approach. He maintains that even if empirical judgments are generalizations that do not allow for claims of necessity, it does not alter the structure of judgments of necessity, where x is considered necessarily given when y is given.

Lange's naturalist conception of the knowledge conditions is accompanied by an account of aesthetic idealism. "The principle that governs beauty, art, and poetry is the same principle that serves as the ethical standard in the realm of action" (Lange 2015/1866, 554/982). He argues that in order to make judgments of necessity possible, we must picture our world as a cumulation of logically coherent laws. But because the world never presents itself as such in experience, it remains a fictitious concept, which we necessarily presuppose as an *idea of unity*.

Although we are incapable of knowing whether an "ultimate unity of laws" exists, our faculty of understanding forces us to create this idea, which transcends our experience (2015, 265). Despite Lange's naturalization of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, his "account of necessity" includes the presupposition of an aesthetic element (Patton 2011, 150). Empirically informed logical operations are idealized concepts presupposing the imagination of an idea of unity that makes the conception of necessary natural laws possible.

Lange's naturalism and idealism also characterize his view on the evolution of morals as outlined in *The Worker's Question*. Inspired by Adam Smith, Lange argues that human nature deploys two distinct tendencies: an egoistic tendency, grounded in our natural side, and sympathy, grounded in our rationality. These two features would have shaped our history of humanity that proceeds antagonistically. While the *egoistic* disposition strives towards maximizing our advantage over others, the oppositional tendency strives towards the promotion of *sympathetic* behavior.

By drawing upon the Weber-Fechner law, Lange provides a psychophysiological explanation for egoism and greed in order to understand why even the wealthy exhibit egoistic behavior so frequently. The Weber-Fechner law states that as the initial pressure level increases, a greater amount of pressure is required to perceive a noticeable difference. The joy derived from a rise in income follows a similar pattern. For the poor, even a slight increase in income can significantly enhance their well-being. However, the wealthy would require a considerably larger increase to experience a similar effect (1870, 115–18). According to Lange, this principle explains the greed in capitalism. It clarifies why, despite an overarching trend toward progress, human beings persist in structuring their societies to gain an advantage over others. On a structural level, it delineates the emergence of normalized exploitative practices.

Sympathy, on the other hand, is an oppositional moral feeling that seeks equality. Lange takes it to be a feeling that is not grounded in sensation, but a feeling connected to rationality. Next to the "world of being," Lange believes that we find ourselves in a "world of values," which

is guided by the idea of a unity of ends (2015, 557, see Kraus 2023). However, Lange rejects the Kantian idea that the categorical imperative provides the form of judgments that leads us to objective ethical principles. Akin to his aesthetic theory accompanying his theoretical philosophy, Lange claims that ethical ideas are products of our aesthetic imagination (ibid.). In this sense, we imagine, by the power of our aesthetic consciousness, a counterfactual world, which we seek to materialize in the real world. This idea is not arbitrary; rather, it opens up an ideal "standpoint" that allows us to imagine a society guided by a harmonious set of norms, wherein egoistic tendencies that cause class contradictions are disregarded (1897, 10). Lange sees the humanistic tendencies, which have "eliminated" norms that legitimize atrocities, as grounded in deliberations where the idea of harmony is presupposed.

Having clarified the naturalist account of egoism and the idealist account of sympathy underlying his political and social philosophy, we shall now see how Lange uses this framework to approach the emergence of ideas in history. According to Lange, ideas either promote behavior in support of the current (immoral) state of affairs or advocate for change, aligning with the moral-aesthetic notion of harmony. The former aligns with capitalism while the latter finds expression in socialism.

One idea Lange takes to play into the hands of capitalism is the idea of the "state as an organism," as it was defended by the Aristotelian philosopher Adolf Trendelenburg (1802-1872). Trendelenburg was an influential philosopher and a "loyal Prussian" who was convinced that "the Hohenzollers [the ruling aristocracy] were the very model of enlightened rule" (Beiser 2013, 71). Trendelenburg's theory of the state posited the feudal state as the logical culmination of human evolution. Lange seeks to expose the ideological elements associated with the concept of the state as an organism by demonstrating how this idea has historically fostered a disposition to comply with authority, leading to a collective acceptance of egoistic structures in capitalism.

Hand in hand with the overestimation of the state in relation to the individual and the notion of an organism composed of ruling and serving members, there is an aversion to

revolution. Therefore, it is probably not coincidental that we find this sentiment so blatantly expressed precisely by one of our German Aristotelians [Trendelenburg], who, as a versatilely educated philosopher, should otherwise have a broader perspective rather than being just a blind fanatic of legitimism. (Lange 1870, 23)

Even though Lange himself prefers reforms over revolution, he criticizes philosophers who have contributed to an uncritical stance towards state authority, resulting in blind obedience. Trendelenburg's defense of the "organic worldview," which perceives the social realm not as a world generated by human-made laws but as guided by the idea that we are determined by "relentless laws of nature," would justify and perpetuate a passive attitude towards the egoistic and exploitative practices we find in capitalism (Lange 1870, 17).

Once we liberate ourselves from these biases, Lange believes that we would come to realize that socialism provides an answer to the current capitalist struggle for survival:

Once we are liberated from such theories, experience must be once again the guide for the new construction. But this experience has matured through history, been enlightened by statistics, and equipped with excellent tools provided by the sciences to solve new problems. (Lange 1870, 17)

Lange's engagement with the origin of capitalism-supporting ideas is a means towards the end of liberating the reader from misleading capitalist ideologies. Lange's undertaking could almost be called genealogical: it picks up on what he considers to be values that are commonly held in society, such as the belief that the capitalist practice of competition is unavoidable; highlights their ideological content; and presents socialism as the antithetical idea of a society guided by norms that we imagine under the idea of unity and the absence of egoism.

Hermann Cohen: The Evolution of the Kantian Idea of the Realm of Ends

Similar to Lange's extensive exploration of materialism, Cohen's works discuss the history of idealism with nearly equal depth. In Cohen's mature practical philosophy—*Ethics of the Pure Will* (1904/1908), *Kant's Foundation of Ethics* (1910), and *Religion out of the Sources of Judaism*

(1918)—we encounter numerous passages where he directs attention toward the evolution of practical reason. While Lange situates ethics as subsidiary to aesthetics, Cohen positions ethics as a subdivision of epistemology, dealing with empirically observable forms of moral knowledge, which he terms the "facts of culture." To ascertain the conditions that enable moral judgments, one must investigate the social facts that emerge from moral deliberation, particularly within the "scientific" realm of jurisprudence (*Rechtswissenschaft*). Grounding his approach in the social facts of experience, Cohen's framework enables regression to the categories of freedom assumed within moral deliberation (2001/1877, A16 B188). A study of moral systems reveals that across history, humanity has introduced moral ideas counteracting cruel practices—like the sacrificial rituals in pagan belief systems. While differing in content, the teleological concept of freedom represents the ideal essence of the "systematicity of ends," fundamental to all these ethical movements (ibid., B298). Whereas the logic of natural sciences pursues non-contradictory, causal explanations, ethical deliberation—under the premise of unity—illuminates how the social world ought to be orchestrated.

Cohen stresses a social and teleological reading of Kant's kingdom of ends, arguing that ethical deliberation would deal with the evolution of social norms that manifest in the "administration of the moral world":

> No person is allowed to be used 'merely as a means.' Every person must always, at the same time, in the administration of the moral world, be treated as ends-in-themselves. (Ibid., B279–80)

In order to understand Cohen's teleological take on ethical rationality, a deeper look into his interest in normative concepts that change throughout time in light of his early work is instructive.

As shown somewhere else (Widmer 2021), Cohen's early development was heavily influenced by the two *Völkerpsychologists*, Moritz Lazarus (1824-1903) and Heymann Steinthal (1823-1899). This school espoused a loosely Herbartian position, positing that concepts

encompass a history and imagery that imbue them with meaning. Perception is considered an active engagement of the mind, relying on unconsciously "compressed" contents (*verdichtete Inhalte*) that shaped our thinking (Kusch 2019, 254). The aim of *Völkerpsychologie* is to lay open these contents. By exploring the origins of myths, the concept of gods, and other ideas that trace back to their psychological and historical roots, Cohen seeks to investigate the historical origin of concepts that shape our cultural practices (Cohen 1869/2012, 430; see Widmer 2021).

In his mature works, Cohen shifts his focus. Instead of tackling the "psychological" formation of ontological concepts, he directs his attention to the "pure" aspect of knowledge, thereby trying to explain how the advancement of truth and morality concepts in the sciences and culture is possible. However, this turn toward a rational telos still retains traces of his earlier interests, as it concentrates on the presuppositions that facilitated cultural knowledge. Cohen notes that the Kantian notion of the unity of ends only recently found a 'purer' formulation in Kant. However, this necessary idea guided our practices even before Kant. Mediated to other absolute concepts, like the concept of God, the categorical imperative has taken on various shapes and forms throughout history. These diverse manifestations have put forth ethical norms that contributed to societal progress (Cohen 2001/1877, A8 B9, Widmer 2021).

Against this background, Cohen grounds a theory of culture that focuses specifically on the emergence of those concepts that promoted societal progress. Cohen justifies the pure will as a historically conditioned notion. "There is no other will than the conditioned will. … Every will, every action is conditional. The condition is the soul, as of the judgment of knowledge, so of the judgment of the will" (ibid., 182). The "pure will," as he calls the idea of systematic ends in his mature thought, never appears as such in the empirical world; it is rather an idea mediated through substantiated concepts, norms, and cultural practices that refer to the system of beliefs at the time (Cohen 2001/1877, 182).

Cohen posits that our understanding of ethical rationality can be derived from the concepts it generates. This perspective underlies Cohen's engagement with ideas that have

materialized over history. By conducting a historical analysis of the state, Cohen strives to illustrate the recurring trend throughout history, where there exists a persistent inclination to conceptualize human nature through a naturalist lens, establishing a relativist ethical standpoint that presents an obstacle to human progress.

In this context, Cohen discusses the moral ideas from ancient times. According to Cohen, the pagan belief system was rooted in an anthropomorphic and pluralistic conception of gods, resulting in a relativistic moral belief system. Within this system, one god demands an action ϕ, while another god could demand its exact opposite, not-ϕ. This contradiction gave rise to a belief system where practices like sacrificial rituals could be deemed justifiable (Cohen 1919/1966, 399-401).

However, Cohen argues that the introduction of the Jewish monotheistic idea brought about a shift towards a notion of universality that allows for a non-contradicting rendering of practices. With only one god necessitating a consistent moral belief system, the concept of unity was first introduced through the Jewish notion of God (Cohen 1919/1966, 399-401). In Cohen's view, this transition from a relativistic moral belief system to a more universal and coherent ethical framework played a pivotal role in shaping moral principles that have endured through the ages—even influencing the German idealist tradition. However, Cohen's exploration of the evolution of ethical rationality does not conclude with his examination of ancient times.

Similarly, Cohen pinpoints contemporary immoral ideas within the capitalist belief system that have hindered cultural progress.

> If through the division of labor, an isolation of the action is brought about, through which the unity of a person is destroyed, then the division of labor destroys the unity of culture… The isolated act is bound by the obligation to bring about the unification and cohesion of [economic] traffic (*Verkehr*). (1981/1904, 607)

Similar to how Judaism overcame a relativistic and immoral belief system, Cohen sees the Kantian notion of moral ends guiding the nineteenth century away from an instrumental capitalist worldview in which individuals are "reduced to mere means" (ibid., 322).

Socialism emerges as the ethical counterforce capable of confronting and surmounting unethical practices within capitalism.

> It is truly not only a progress of ethical culture but also indirectly a progress of ethical science that in our century […] the question of optimism has been replaced by the problem of socialism. The Job of our era no longer asks whether mankind has more sunshine than rain, but rather whether one person suffers more than their neighbour, and whether in the dispensing justice of pleasure there exists a predictable connection that makes an increase in pleasure for one member in the realm of morality the logical fate of another member's decrease. (Cohen 1981/1904, 368)

By pointing out the ideological aspects related to a reductionist view of human beings and juxtaposing it with movements that exemplify ethical rationality, Cohen seeks to rouse his contemporaries from the ideological slumber of capitalist ideas, which he deems inherently immoral at its core. "As long as we are regarded merely as labour values, we […] function as a means and […are] utilized and consumed as such" (Cohen 2009/1889, 139). The aim is to awaken collective consciousness and foster critical thinking about the ethical implications of their beliefs and actions within the socio-economic framework.

However, it is crucial to note that Cohen's critique extends beyond the confines of the capitalist belief system; it also takes issue with the materialist and relativist moral perspective advocated by Marx. Despite his admiration for Marx, Cohen perceives historical materialism as a potential threat to ethical consciousness. By underscoring that Marxism fails to fully address the ethical implications inherent in its own theory, Cohen emphasizes the necessity for a more comprehensive exploration of the ethical-normative framework upon which Marxists should base their critique of capitalism.

> Whoever would accept the thesis that man is absolutely the product of the economy ... has committed himself to Mephisto; he has abandoned the difference between matter and the spirit and the morality of man. (1981/1904, 314)

Cohen's interest in the historical origin of ethical concepts extends beyond merely establishing the bedrock of ethical rationality. Through his emphasis on the conceptual expressions of claims containing a notion of ethical universality, Cohen delivers a critique of ideological notions that undermine ethical consciousness.

Ernst Cassirer: The Emergence of Mythical Destruction

Cassirer's perspective diverges from the narrower scope of rationality found in Lange and Cohen. With the assumption that human nature finds expression in symbolic forms such as language, myth, art, religion, history, and science, he significantly expands upon the focus of his predecessors. However, Cassirer does not abandon the Marburg School's core interest in the evolution of rationality. While he does not explicitly isolate ethics as a distinct symbolic form, works such as *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923), *Axel Hägerström* (1939), *An Essay on Man* (1944), and *Myth of the State* (1949) reveal that ethical deliberation forms the foundation for an evaluative notion of universality. Similar to Cohen, Cassirer advocates for an ideal concept of universality that gave rise to more humane practices.

Judging from his limited remarks on Kantian ethics, Cassirer appears to embrace the notion of the "pure will" as a "function" of consciousness, which he regards as an essential requirement for the potentiality of objective ethical normativity, encompassing a historically sensitive understanding of rationality. In this context, Cassirer discards the underlying assumption of the "existence" of formal laws. He contends that "each function is inevitably represented in [empirical] reality" (1929, 237). This embeddedness also stands as a pivotal aspect of Cassirer's concept of moral autonomy.

In *Axel Haegerstroem*, published 18 years after *Freedom and Form*, Cassirer supports the fundamental systematic concepts of Kant's ethical theory as the "functions" of ethical consciousness.

> [T]he pure meaning of Kant's concept of duty and ethical autonomy can be peeled out and corrected without establishing it in the same way as Kant—by the distinction of the "mundus sensibilis" from the "mundus intelligibilis." Here … a certain *functional* meaning of the basic ethical concepts remains, which is not bound to their metaphysical-substantial conceptual mantling. (1939, 83)

Cassirer's functional interpretation of the moral law is deemed realized through our practices, presupposing a "dynamic" understanding of rationality (see Friedman 2000; Luft 2015) that remains attuned to form changes.

As with every form of human expression, Cassirer believes that ethical deliberation finds its starting point in mythical thinking. He engages with myth in two distinct ways. His anthropological writings discuss myth as a distinct form of life. Just as the sciences have the "function" to "unify thought" (1949, 37), so religion and myth serve a social purpose as they constitute "a unity of feeling"—a pre-reflective effect of ethical rationality (ibid.). The study of myth leads to insights into the ontological order of knowledge at different stages of humanity. Myth is "logically primordial" or a "sine qua non-condition for all other modalities of knowledge" (Pedersen 2023). However, fascist myths are different as they are misused as a political weapon. "Fascist myth" is an *intentional* elimination of agency for the purposes of manipulation at a stage when mythical thinking had already been overcome (cf. 1949, 3).

In *Myth of the State*, Cassirer engages with the genealogy of concepts that have contributed to the flourishing of fascist ideologies that went astray from the teleological path, progressing toward more ethical and autonomous life forms. To explain how the destruction of a free understanding of the self and agency was possible after the awakening of the moral self

in the Enlightenment, Cassirer discusses several theories—Carlyle, Gobineau, Hegel, and Heidegger—that allegedly contributed to the "fascist soil."

According to Cassirer, Thomas Carlyle's influential lecture "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History" (1840) undermined the concept of moral freedom (1949, 213) by demanding the subordination of individuals (ibid., 214). This purportedly marked a crucial step backward in the development of human culture. Moreover, Arthur de Gobineau's essay "Sur l'inégalité des races humaines" from 1853 established a new "race worship" that was crucial in National Socialism. Gobineau's deterministic or "fatalistic" conception of history would have undermined any sense of free human agency that is characteristic of the Enlightenment (ibid., 225). Even Hegel—of whom Cassirer speaks fondly in other works—is not spared from criticism. Cassirer argues that Hegel's notion of the state would "contain the clearest and most ruthless program of fascism" (ibid., 267).[2] The loss of agency is, according to Cassirer, radicalized in Spengler's fatalistic *Decline of the West* (1919) and Heidegger's *Geworfenheits* philosophy, where the human being is viewed as fully determined by history.

These theories provided the conceptual pool of worship of power, heroes, and race from which the National Socialists could draw their deeply unethical ideology. These thoughts destroyed the cultural mindset that led to progress. While "myth has always been described as the result of an unconscious activity," Cassirer claims that "[t]he new political myths" were "artificial things fabricated by very skillful and cunning artists" (ibid., 282).

Cassirer's genealogy of the destruction of humanism builds upon the previously outlined Kantian principle of autonomy, which he considers a "functional" principle. This concept informs the telos that humanity pursues, enabling him to identify intellectual developments that deviate from the intended path. By tracing the evolution of humanism and its underlying principles,

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[2] Cassirer did not think that Hegel would have endorsed twentieth-century fascism. He is skeptical of Hegel's equalization of the ideal and the real state paired with his dialectical understanding of objectivity that justified an absolutist form of government (Matherne 2021, 205).

Cassirer sheds light on how certain ideologies and intellectual movements have led to the erosion of humanist values and autonomy.

> These ideas [humanism] were not based upon religion but upon a new type of philosophical ethics. They had found their most explicit systematic description in the work of Kant, the cornerstone of which was the idea of freedom—and freedom meant "autonomy." That is the expression of the principle that the moral subject has to obey no rules other than those he gives to himself. Man is not only a means that may be used for external ends; he is himself the "legislator in the realm of the end." That constitutes his true dignity, his prerogative above all mere physical being. … All this was not only entirely unintelligible to Gobineau but simply intolerable. (Ibid., 235).

Cassirer's interest in ethical life forms is meant to highlight how fascist ideology polluted the ethical consciousness that had been established by Kant and the post-Kantians. Fascist ideology regressed from the stage of enlightenment. Through his analysis of this ideology, Cassirer criticizes this regression, thereby aiming to correct and redirect the path that was set by Kant and the post-Kantian tradition.

The Evolution of Rationality: An Inspiration for Genealogists

While it would be inaccurate to assume that the Marburg neo-Kantians adhered to a singular unified theory, their accounts share several common features. Their interest in the evolution of rationality encompasses (i) a teleological comprehension of human history, (ii) an ideology rooted in a naturalist worldview that embraces a relativist stance in ethics, (iii) the use of a hermeneutical method to interpret social practices from an ideal standpoint, and (iv) the intention to provoke critical thought. Let us now delve deeper into these distinct characteristics.

First, the proponents believe that history proceeds teleologically, and (ethical) rationality gradually unfolds in the practices we adopt to confront immoral behaviors. Consequently, ethical rationality is not viewed as grounded in abstract principles disconnected from reality; instead, the facts underpinning our social reality provide evidence that we

inevitably participate in and are surrounded by practices stemming from rational deliberation. Lange perceives ethical progress as an aesthetic response to the evolutionary struggle for survival. Cohen identifies misleading paths by highlighting ethical counterparts that serve the right ethical end. Cassirer considers ideological thinking as a re-establishment of a primordial form of mythical thinking at a time when rationality had already made significant progress.

Second, their genealogical approaches share the idea that ideology is a form of naturalist thinking that relativizes morality. Instead of investigating the ideal components that they consider inevitably present in ethical thinking, ideologies are viewed as adopting a reductionist view of human beings, which comes with a relativist stance that hinders ethical progress. In Lange's analysis, capitalism promotes a normative framework that reflects the egoistic Darwinist struggle for survival. In Cohen's discussion of capitalist labor, the laborer is reduced to a mere means to an economic end. Similarly, Cassirer argues that the race ideologies of the Second World War signify an earlier stage where the clear line between nature and rationality becomes blurred.

Third, the neo-Kantians take the concept of unity as an ideal, *hermeneutical* framework, providing a perspective from which social practices can be examined through an ethical lens. Lange supports this with an aesthetic notion of unity; Cohen with an epistemological concept of unity; and Cassirer with a functional interpretation of unity. In all these instances, a foundation for the interpretation of social practices is established.

Fourth, at the core of their hermeneutical approach lies a spirit of critique. Distinguishing between accurate empirical practices and erroneous ones marks a pivotal stage, aimed at liberating readers from ideological conceptions and instead advocating for practices firmly rooted in ethical considerations. This critical stance is evident in the works of Cohen and Lange, where critiques of capitalism are prevalent. Similarly, in the case of Cassirer, the focus lies in dissecting the ideas that contributed to the events of the Second World War.

Undoubtedly, the classical genealogists would have taken offense at the teleological interpretations of rationality embraced by the Marburg school, and their reaction would have been well-founded. The school's excessively optimistic vision of the future gave rise to imperialistic justifications of the "German spirit," a perspective that appears unimaginable from today's point.[3] In *The German Profession*, Natorp endeavored to rationalize Germany's stance in the First World War by asserting the superiority of the German national spirit over other Western traditions in terms of progressiveness. In this context, he rallied the younger generation to join the war effort, aiming to propagate the German consciousness globally. Predictably, their approaches were after the war overshadowed by their problematic political positions, eliciting strong criticism from philosophers like Ernst Bloch who argued that the Marburg neo-Kantians "perverted" Kant's philosophy (Bloch 1954/1967, 351).

Despite this troubling period in the history of Marburg neo-Kantianism, their historical contextualization of Kantian rationality has produced a valuable critical tool to combat ideological ideas, which explains why their approaches found favor with the classical genealogists. While the Marburg neo-Kantians did not formulate an all-encompassing theory of power akin to those of Marx, Nietzsche, or Foucault, this chapter has demonstrated that their approaches provided a well-considered normative and ethical framework aimed at identifying immoral concepts throughout history. This aspect had consistently been a vulnerability in classical genealogical methods. Those who find such criticism significant might benefit from revisiting the Marburg neo-Kantian tradition.

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[3] I've excluded Natorp from this paper because, besides his problematic political views, his philosophical approach aligns closely with Cohen's view.

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