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# Kant's Theory of Experience at the End of the War: Scholem and Benjamin Read Cohen A Commentary

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## **I. Kant "Today"**

At the end of one side of a manuscript entitled "On Kant" and housed in the Scholem Archive in Jerusalem, one reads the following pronouncement: "it is impossible to understand Kant today."<sup>1</sup> Whatever it might mean to "understand" Kant, or indeed, whatever "Kant" is here meant to be understood, it is certain, according to the manuscript, that such understanding cannot come about by way of purporting to have returned to or spoken in the name of "Kant." For "[t]oday," so the document begins, "there are many people who call themselves Kantians, and who profess to have—or actually do have—cognitions in Kantian terminology." Whatever the degree of truth or falsity to such cognitions, however, neither those who produce these cognitions nor a philosophy consisting in these cognitions have a right to call themselves "Kantian," since it is "obvious" that "such terminology is not equivalent to Kantian language" but is abstracted from "language" as innovations towards the better description of the world. Were cognitions reducible to the use of certain fundamental concepts abstracted as terminol-

<sup>1</sup>Gershom Scholem, "Über Kant," Scholem Arc 4° 1599 File 277/I #14, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem. Reproduced in the present volume in transcription and translation under the titles "Über Kant" and "On Kant" (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as "On Kant").

ogy, philosophy as such would be reducible to the trials and errors of philosophers who seek cognition but can only hope to approach it from the standpoint of invention—such that no philosopher will have ever attained an understanding of the cognitions denoted by the name “philosophy” until the end of philosophy. Thus, the manuscript continues, “[i]t is out of the question that these people, or even just one of them, understand this terminology.” Reduced to the future comprehensibility of the cognitions transmitted in terminology, as “Kantians” would have it, philosophy itself is impossible to understand “today” (“On Kant” 443–44).

Coming from a twenty-six-year-old Walter Benjamin who had only recently decided on the topic for his dissertation, and his twenty-year-old friend Gershom Scholem, who knew less of Kant than of mathematics as he jotted down these notes detailing their joint study of Hermann Cohen’s *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* in the summer of 1918, these pronouncements certainly smack of the hyperbole of youth.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, such soundings of the death knell of Kantianism were far from isolated fantasies of two friends disenchanted with the academics and politics back home.<sup>3</sup> In a lengthy obituary written a few years later for the “last” of the neo-Kantians, Alois Riehl, Heinrich Rickert—with whom Benjamin had studied in Freiburg—also proclaims the death of neo-Kantianism by accusing it of “misunderstanding” and “misusing” the terms of its own name.<sup>4</sup> The name “neo-Kantianism” has been abused, Rickert argues, because thinkers call themselves “neo-Kantian” who have no inclination of returning to Kant’s discoveries in the context of his own time. The only right they have to be called *neo-Kantian* comes from the fact that they returned to Kant at

<sup>2</sup>Scholem was a student of mathematics at the time, and by his own estimation had only started to “gain access” to Kant when he read the *Prolegomena* for the first time in September of the preceding year. Cf. Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995–2000) II: 43 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *TB*). —As I have pointed out in my introduction to the documents “On Kant” and “Against the Metaphysical Exposition of Space” in the present volume, these notes were written in Scholem’s hand but represent the outcome of his discussions together with Benjamin on Cohen’s work. In the following discussion I will refer to the author of these notes as Scholem, with the understanding that their content derives from the thought of both Scholem and Benjamin.

<sup>3</sup>Scholem had just joined Benjamin in Switzerland after being medically certified as unfit for the draft. While in Bern, the two decided to found an imaginary academy, which they named the “Universität Muri,” under whose auspices they began to study Cohen’s *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* together. Cf. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975) 68; 76 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Freundschaft*).

<sup>4</sup>Heinrich Rickert, “Alois Riehl,” in *Logos* 13 (1924–25): 162–85; 164.

a time when Kant was all but forgotten or no longer understood, all the while as they drove philosophy *forwards* as a science in pursuit of their own agendas. The neo-Kantian insistence that Kant's writings may be abstracted into certain fundamental concepts that anyone capable of philosophical reasoning should be able to understand, so Rickert, is thus made possible only by the fact that what Kant intended or achieved with the concepts "has become difficult to understand in our own time" (*ibid.*). Neo-Kantianism is thus a philosophy of the future to the extent that its leading ideas derive from debates that Kant had, in fact, already settled a hundred years earlier; its futurity is exclusively a function of the belatedness of its own ideas *vis-à-vis* "Kant" in his "own" epoch. To the extent that the neo-Kantians seem united in their individual pursuits only on the use of a few *fundamental* concepts [Grundbegriffe] abstracted from Kant, neo-Kantianism appears to be little more than a movement of idiosyncrasies, which, though "new" to the extent that they *depart* from Kant, attain the character of a historically contingent, one-time phenomenon announcing nothing other than its own end.<sup>5</sup>

Rickert's obituary for "the last of the neo-Kantians"—written, incidentally, just three years before another one-time student of his, Martin Heidegger, would publish *Sein und Zeit* (1927)<sup>6</sup>—thus takes exception to the neglect of the historical origins of Kant's technical innovations, which are irrelevant for the "neo-Kantians" to the extent that Kant's critical philosophy is for them a "theory of science" that is continuous with the positive sciences and whose "terminology" is comprehensible *in principle*. From a macroscopic perspective, the

<sup>5</sup>The sentiment that philosophy must grapple with *historical* concept formation in order to grasp the "heterogeneous continuum" *viz.* material of reality that exceeds concept formation as it occurs in the natural sciences, is already expressed in Rickert's *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung: eine logische Einleitung in die historischen Wissenschaften* (Freiburg und Leipzig: Mohr, 1896<sup>1</sup>; 1902<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>6</sup>Two years after that, of course, in 1929, was when the infamous debate between Heidegger and Cassirer took place in Davos, Switzerland, which in popular mythology has taken on the significance of a battle between two epochs: one between a cosmopolitan liberal humanism as represented by the neo-Kantian Cassirer, and a growing and ultimately victorious nationalist irrationalism as represented by Heidegger. Cf. for a seminal account of the debate on its own philosophical terms, beyond the reductiveness of this mythology, Peter Gordon's *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). —Heidegger was quite explicit about the influence that Rickert's book on *Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* had on the development of his own thinking. Cf. Heidegger's letter of March 15, 1921, to Rickert, in which he tells his former mentor that he intends to teach a seminar on his book; and his letter of February 15, 1928, in Martin Heidegger and Heinrich Rickert, *Briefwechsel 1912 bis 1933 und andere Dokumente* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2002) 54; 58.

“death” of neo-Kantianism had been a long time in the making: since 1914, the logical and epistemological horizon dominating neo-Kantian interpretations of Kant’s critical philosophy had been increasingly supplanted by the priority of the fundamental heterogeneity of being, attention to which had been brought to the fore by the collapse of optimism during the war and effected in the name of a “*Lebensphilosophie*” derived from the reception of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. It is clear from the manuscript “On Kant” that this general atmosphere of philosophical conflict—which may be characterized roughly as a contest between the constructibility of being by the principles of science, on the one hand, and the insistence that the material of reality exceeds any such concept formation, on the other—was not lost on the two friends, Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin, as they studied Cohen’s *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* at a distance from the war from their Swiss refuge. Rather than unequivocally devote themselves to the investigation of the “irrational” or the “material” *per se* in response, however, they pursued “the possibility of Kantianism” as a function of that which Scholem calls in his notes “transmissibility as such.” For Scholem and Benjamin, according to the manuscript, “transmissibility as such” replaces the “Kantian system” as the “absolute” from which the “life” of terminology and thus the possibility of Kantianism originates.

As such, the “Kantian system”—which Cohen’s *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* had sought to establish as the unity resulting from the uncovering of principles that construct being in the manner that mathematical objects are presumed to be constructed—is revealed in relation to its own historical constructedness as a “mysticism”: “transmissibility as such” is the name for system’s relation to itself, a relation that cannot be encompassed within the concept “system” *per se*, and which must therefore be considered as the utterly unscientific, “magical” or “irrational,” *invented* ground of neo-Kantian scientificity. For Scholem and Benjamin, everything—that is, everything that the neo-Kantian project sought to establish through the “fact of science”: world, reality, being—hinges on the possibility of providing alternative grounds for objectivity such that it is not reduced to a “life” of “terminology” or mere “semblance” of scientificity, or, as Scholem notes in a diary entry on July 25, 1918, to “nominalistic ontology” with whose “nominal definitions [Cohen] perpetuates a bogus method and reality” (*TB II*: 276). By inventing their own terminology, and typographically marking its inventedness by underlining the nominalizing suffix “-ity [-keit]” in the term “transmissibility,” Scholem and Benjamin announce their intent to pursue their own investigation into an alternative concept

of the transcendental named “transmissibility as such.” Their investigation is one through which “transmissibility” might be uncovered not as a merely “nominal” or arbitrary assignment of signs to things in philosophical cognition, under which aspect objective reality, and indeed Kant’s entire critical enterprise, threaten to dissipate into “mysticism” *qua* lifeless scientificity, but, rather, as a systematic relation—and systematic bringing-into-relation—of concept to its own “mystical” ground. Such an investigation, which would presume neither to generate the possibility of experience on the terminological “semblance of life,” nor that philosophy, reduced to systematicity, has a grasp on the absolute, would be “legitimately” transcendental: more transcendental, in any case, than the “ceremonial protocol” with which Cohen’s *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, one of the founding texts of the Marburg school’s view that science mediates life, perfunctorily and systematically “bows” before the “transcendental” without ever attaining the “object.”

## II. *Drohwort, Erfahrung*

The concept of “system” at work in Cohen’s Kantianism hinges upon its self-stylization as a philosophy oriented towards the future: Kant’s discovery of the “transcendental method” as he exposed space and time as a priori forms that ground our cognition of nature. According to the historical introduction to the second edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*,<sup>7</sup> Kant’s “new method” had always been the future to come, portended by three figures corresponding to three stages in a cumulative defense against psychologism: Leibniz, Hume, and Newton. In this narrative,<sup>8</sup> Leibniz is the originator of a method that allows for extension to be grounded in an inextensive yet positive moment of thought—“force [*Kraft*]” conceived as “intension [*Intension*]”—which

<sup>7</sup>Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (Berlin: F. Dümmler, 1871<sup>1</sup>, 1885<sup>2</sup>) (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *KTE*).

<sup>8</sup>Cohen borrows the results from his recent investigation of Leibniz in *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte: Ein Kapitel zur Grundlegung der Erkenntniskritik* (Berlin: F. Dümmler, 1883). As Andrea Poma points out, Cohen’s incorporation of results from his investigation of Leibniz, as well as his account of Kant’s place in the history of philosophy, represent two of the distinguishing features of the reworked second edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, and thus two aspects that mark this second edition as a step towards the establishment of Cohen’s own philosophical voice—his neo-Kantianism—as opposed to an explication of Kant in the manner of the first edition. Cf. Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*. Trans. by John Denton (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997) 37–8.

he equates with the infinitesimal, a non-sensible and thus pure concept of thought borrowed from mathematics (*KTE* 37–8). In making mathematics prior to sensible cognition and logic prior to mathematics, however, Leibniz “overestimates” logic’s capacity to determine material (*KTE* 39–40), and loses the essential mediation to the real that for Cohen is provided by mathematics.<sup>9</sup> As a corrective, Hume asserts that the representation of the connection between things by the concept of causality is a function of habit rather than an axiomatic concept of cause as such (*KTE* 52). But in asserting that “space” arises from the repetition of sense impressions, Hume presupposes the prior existence of points of whose impressions the fundamental concepts are the copy (*KTE* 72). Cohen then invokes Newton’s proof of gravity “by means of phenomena and [ . . . ] through speculations that are made about these phenomena” (*KTE* 54) as the privileged example of a method that investigates science itself as already containing the fundamental concepts upon which phenomena depend, thereby laying the ground for a theory of *possible* scientific cognition (*KTE* 67). In spite of the title that Newton himself gave to his principal work, the *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica*, there is no priority in the relation between mathematics and metaphysics, as both are principles a priori and represent “two wings” that supplement each other to form one system (*KTE* 65).

By asserting that Newton was in fact a “systematic scientist,” Cohen makes Newtonian physics into the model for Kantian transcendental philosophy to the extent that it points towards the necessity of a metaphysical foundation for a transition to physics. Invoking the *Opus postumum*, Kant’s own incomplete attempt to “transition to physics” in the absence of an adequate metaphysics (*KTE* 63), Cohen argues that Kant turns to “examining the cognitive value and ground of certainty in Newtonian natural science” (*KTE* 66) because Newton articulates a difference to the representations we give to ourselves of our sense impressions that is *internal* to our production of knowledge (*KTE* 73). It is the articulation of this internal difference that Kant achieves with his use of the “threatening word [*Drohwort*]”: “experience [*Erfahrung*]” (*KTE* 66). “The word experience” (*KTE* 72) thus has a terminological character specific to Newtonian scientific method, invented to

<sup>9</sup>That is, in “taking a law of logic to be sufficient as the principle for the grounding of the physical nature of things” (*KTE* 52), Leibniz bypasses mathematics’ “inner relation to sense impression” (*KTE* 44) and the “inner, productive relation” (*KTE* 49) that mathematics has to nature.

“fortify” (KTE 78) Hume’s “sensualist weapons” by “weakening the critical prejudice [*das kritische Vorurtheil*]” that presumes that we may infer the existence of “things” from our sense impressions (KTE 73). For as Cohen argues, the fundamental elements of cognition are each inevitably accompanied by a “general expression of consciousness”: we cannot conceive of consciousness without remainder (KTE 74). Were science not rooted in foundations of consciousness that we regard as inaccessible to analysis—that is, as a priori intuition—science would be in danger of falling prey to the whims of the arbitrary combinations of our perceptions (KTE 76). “The word experience” sets the “general expression of consciousness” that must accompany any thought as the limit to (psychological) analysis: in scientific cognition, what we take to be a “final element of consciousness” must be a function of *how* we take it to be, an *assumption* of its scientific groundedness—“Every *ens* must be a *quale*” (KTE 74).

By extension, the task of determining the elements of the human consciousness must be regarded as *constitutively incomplete* in order to ensure that the concepts used in the theory of cognition correspond without prejudice to the elements of consciousness they are meant to represent. In the interest of limiting the pretensions of analysis, Cohen declares that the outcome of the metaphysical exposition of a priori intuitions is only of “relative” value, and that we can only *assume* that the “fundamental concepts [*Grundbegriffe*]” of consciousness are given a priori, since only the metaphysical exposition’s general *orientation* towards them is unconditionally necessary: *which* fundamental concepts they are is a matter of the history of science (KTE 77). Cohen thus *methodologically* ensures that history *as such* validates science, since it is precisely in conceiving itself in and as the history of science that science can bracket off overestimations of the power of logic or analysis and ensure that the scientific concept corresponds to its object: as with Descartes’s piece of wax, it is impossible to determine whether an “*Ur-Ding*” or some other constant remains in or through real change (KTE 77). And for the same reason that an element of consciousness must exist which in its unanalyzability grounds the validity of the concept that has been historically produced, the history of science also *progresses* asymptotically towards its object, since one can *presume* that such elements of consciousness, in their limited analyzability, are sufficient and necessary for grounding the fact of science: “the determinacy of a priori elements orient themselves in their relation and competence towards the facts of scientific cognition which they are to ground” (*ibid.*).



The validity of cognitions—*how* they are possible—and the culmination of the “metaphysical a priori” in the “transcendental—a priori” (*KTE* 78)—are thus guaranteed, as it were, by the history *in toto* of *how* they are represented by particular concepts. And vice versa: the fact of science, in its historical manifestation, is guaranteed by the a priori principle *that* such an a priori principle must be presumed to exist in the definition of scientific cognition as such. Against the horizon of their asymptotic approach to the “thing,” “point,” or “final element,” which is to say against the horizon of their corresponding “general expressions of consciousness,” the fundamental concepts regulating the cognition of things thus appear neither as a pure concept of thought, nor as a blind copy of sense impression, but as “words,” “threatening words,” “the word (for)” *x*: as terminology. Philosophy’s systematicity is guaranteed—by the history of its terms. As Cohen remarks: “Precisely because and insofar as science is no fairy tale”—insofar as we must assume that what goes up must come down—“it is possible to find in its fundamental concepts, which are determined by *literary proof*,” i.e., proof in strategically chosen words, the “correspondence with the most general truths of logic that speculative reason ever abstracted from the confusion of thought” (*KTE* 78; my emphasis).

### III. *The Fourth Term*

For Cohen’s Kant, “experience” is a technical term invented as a threat against both logic’s overdetermination of the real and psychologism’s latent empiricism, fortifying Hume’s “sensualist weapons” with the introduction of an “internal difference” in the production of cognition: the a priori. The investigation of these a priori elements of our cognition is the task of the “metaphysical exposition,” though it may hope only to infinitely approach such a priori entities, never to determine them. By the same token, the progress from concept to thing is secured insofar as Cohen *methodologically* acquires the possibility of grounding scientific cognition on the assumption that there are certain elements of consciousness prior to analysis, and that therefore the *task* set upon the metaphysical exposition of a priori elements of consciousness is constitutively incompletely, or *infinite*. The outcome of Cohen’s exposition of the metaphysical exposition, however, is that “science” is thereby cast as the function of a history of terms strategically chosen to furnish “proof” of the existence of fundamental concepts, of the correspondence with the general truths of logic, and thus of “facticity” in general. In the end, the neo-Kantian concept of science appears to

consist in “one great metaphysical capitulation before pragmatism,” since “only what is useful to cognition” is identified as an element of cognition (“On Kant” #)—as if “an epistemological *end* [*Zweck*] could serve as the argument for ‘method’ in logic!!!” (*TB* II: 274)

Such, too, was the gist of Scholem’s and Benjamin’s criticism of Cohen as they read the “Introduction” to *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*. In another set of notes from the Scholem Archive composed in the context of “On Kant” and entitled “Against the metaphysical exposition of space,”<sup>10</sup> Scholem writes:

Cohen wants to claim (on page 77) that only the *posing of the question* of the a priori is timelessly valid, but that the content, on the other hand—[the question of] *which* ones are the fundamental concepts—is determined by the “progressive culture of the spirit.” For this reason, the metaphysical exposition is supposed to possess irrefutable validity in its tendency alone, but only relative validity in its results. (“Against” 444)

The problem, according to Scholem, is this: by claiming that the metaphysical exposition of the a priori is valid only in its general tendency and is otherwise relative to the particular content of scientific discovery, Cohen’s Kant leaves the validity of cognition up to the notion that history (of science) is composed of a “progressive culture of the spirit” and the concepts that turn out to be correct along the way. In this case, “timeless validity” would accrue to philosophy only in terms of philosophy’s intention to investigate the a priori—it would be unconditional only in its “posing of the question” of necessity and only in its proposing *that* an internal difference subsists in all cognitive activity. Its “results,” that is, the particular cognitions accruing to the investigation of the validity of all cognition, would be considered possible not by force of principles regulating them internally, but on the grounds of their adequacy to the fundamental concepts they are supposed to approach *in* the course of time, and attain to at the

<sup>10</sup>Scholem, “Gegen die metaphysische Erörterung des Raumes,” Scholem Arc 4° 1599 File 277/I #11, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem. Reproduced in the present volume in transcription and translation under the titles “Gegen die metaphysische Erörterung des Raumes” and “Against the metaphysical exposition of space” (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as “Against”). —According to Scholem’s diary, Scholem and Benjamin started reading Cohen’s *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* around May 23, 1918 (entry of June 23, 1918, *TB* II: 251); they begin the section on the “metaphysical exposition of space” (Chapter One) on June 17, 1918 (*TB* II: 238). Scholem makes the decision to write up notes on his conversations with Benjamin on June 26, 1918 (*TB* II: 258).

*end* of history. From this point of view all cognitions of science are possible, and thus correct, so long as the concepts underlying their possibility are proven valid, which is to say so long as they are proven to correspond to the sum total, however that may be conceived, of all possible scientific cognition. “The conceivability of such an evolution,” however, “if it is to have serious meaning at all, is unintelligible” (“Against” 458).

Such “evolution” is “unintelligible” because, as Benjamin writes in a fragment composed in December 1917<sup>11</sup> around the time he considered writing on the Marburg school’s theory of science for his dissertation: to the extent that “science” is conceived as the investigation of a priori intuitions, science is an “infinite task” that can be unconditional only in its “form,” not in its “material” or “content.” For the “unity of science”—the ground on which science might maintain its “autonomy” from both the emptiness of thought and the blindness of intuition—must be based on the idea that “it is not the answer to a finite question, or that it cannot be asked for [*erfragt werden*]”: otherwise, validity would be a mere function of the “infinite number of all possible questions about the world and being” (GS VI: 51). If the “infinite task” were understood as a set of solutions whose “infinity” is limited to possible answers that have been “asked for” by valid questions, cognition would be reducible to what Scholem glosses as “the posing of the question” (“Against” 458): being, reality and world would be begging the question. To relate cognition to its object, one needs to recognize instead that “[t]asked to science is the task whose solution itself still remains within it, which is to say [ . . . ] that its solution is methodological” (GS VI: 52): that is, as a *task* whose infinity is of a “higher power [*höherer Mächtigkeit*]” than “all” of its “possible” answers. Only if the infinity of the task is in excess of all possibility might cognition not infinitely regress from its object, and science be something other than the description of sensory impression or logical confabulation. The infinity of task can therefore only be *methodological*, a *formal* possibility for a question to be posed or a thesis to be posited in time—and therefore bears the name: “solvability as such.” Only as a “formality” can science fulfill the “infinite task” of providing itself (and any philosophy that regards its cognitions of reality as fundamentally and verifiably scientific) with the grounds for its own certainty.

<sup>11</sup>Benjamin, “Die unendliche Aufgabe,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) VI: 51–2 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as GS).

Benjamin then brings this thesis to bear on Cohen's *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* after he and Scholem begin to study its "Introduction" in the summer of 1918. The final lines of the fragment on the "infinite task," which likely record the outcome of a discussion Benjamin had with Scholem about its main themes just days after Scholem's arrival in Bern in early May 1918,<sup>12</sup> further specify the "task that is tasked to science" in terms of the terminology of Cohen's "Introduction"<sup>13</sup>: "Science does not correspond to an infinitely numerous analysis [*unendlich zahlreiche Analysis*], but rather is an infinite, absolute (not relative) synthesis [*unendliche absolute (nicht relative) Synthesis*]" (*GS VI*: 52). The criticism aims at the very cornerstone of the Marburg school's understanding of the first *Critique* as a theory of knowledge. For, on the one hand, Cohen insists that we must set a limit on the analyzability of consciousness with the "threat" of an a priori "general expression of consciousness" in order for there to be an infinite task. On the other hand, Cohen does away with this constitutive remainder by defining the infinity of the task as the infinite number of "relative" results whose sum total must be calculable in order that it ground the fact of science. In insisting on the "relativity" of cognition to the fact of science, Cohen reduces the "infinite task" from a formal condition to a "solution" already predisposed in the "posing of the question," and thereby to "infinitely numerous analysis" that arrives at its object by projecting its total calculability or by ending history. Cohen's method methodologically undermines the possibility of its own task. And in Scholem's words, Cohen has erroneously produced a "mystical obscurity" out of the metaphysical foundation of the transcendental method by "granting" a "critical right [. . . ] to positivism" ("Against" 458).

<sup>12</sup>Though Benjamin put the subject of "the infinite task" on hiatus at the end of March 1918 in favor of concentrating on what would ultimately become his thesis on the *Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* (cf. Benjamin's letter to Scholem on March 30, 1918, in *Briefe*, 2 vols., ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966) I: 180 [hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Briefe*]), he appears to have brought along his fragment from December 1917 or at least recited its contents for discussion "in the evening" of May 7, 1918 during which Benjamin and Scholem "spoke for three hours" about the themes from "Die unendliche Aufgabe" ("science as infinite task," "the Marburg neo-Kantians and the idea of science," how "science cannot be asked for [*erfragt*]," and "solvability as such") as well as another fragment, "Über die Wahrnehmung," which Benjamin had composed in October 1917 as a preliminary study to his essay "On the Program for a Coming Philosophy" (*TB II*: 221). According to the editors of Benjamin's *Gesammelten Schriften*, the final lines of "Die unendliche Aufgabe" were written later than the preceding text (*GS VI*: 665).

<sup>13</sup>Benjamin and Scholem began to study the "Introduction" about two weeks after Scholem's arrival on May 4, 1918.

Underlying Cohen's error, to quote from another fragment that Benjamin composed during the summer of 1918, "On the Transcendental Method," is this: in positing the total calculability of the world, we assume that "in mathematics, validity and correctness transition into one another because (perhaps) nothing is added to the fundamental concepts" (GS VI: 52–3). Science accrues from the "speculations that are made about the phenomena" (KTE 54) because we assume that its infinity is the product of certain mathematical operations generating the infinite repetition of the same, and that mathematical truths can be intuited from observing an infinite number of objects falling. In actuality, this "ill-fated confusion," which has led to a "bogus facticity" in Kant's successors (GS VI: 52), is the product of the assumption that "(perhaps) nothing is added to the fundamental concepts" in assimilating science to the image of quantitative infinity, to the assumption that we have enough time, indeed all the time in the world, to observe an object falling an infinite number of times. Benjamin marks the assumption with a "(perhaps)," and notes that it results from the fact that neither Kant nor his successors recognize that it is "language," not science, which "gives" the concepts to be investigated. Whatever else "language" means in this context, it seems to present the post-Kantian positivist with the same problem as does mathematics: namely, that his fundamental concepts are, "(perhaps)," founded on the "postulate" that what is true is necessarily given in science, that experience is possible only if scientifically verifiable, that the possibility of the physical world is given by Newtonian mathematical natural science—or that mathematics consists in synthetic a priori judgments. If the fundamental concepts of our experience are given in facts of language, then Kant and his epigones are presented with the problem that mathematics does not necessarily correspond to experience, and burdened with proving why science is *not*, as Benjamin suggests, "infinite *absolute* (not relative) synthesis" (GS VI: 52)—that a heavy body suspended in the air, for instance, will necessarily fall to the ground, even if we are not there as witness. To restate: Benjamin's modest "(perhaps)" marks the place where validity and correctness might coincide—and might not. The burden of proof lies with Cohen to explain how and why, despite the apparent mathematizability of nature and history, the world could still recede from thought—or as Scholem writes, Cohen must "explain how the results of an eidetic investigation are supposed to be *relative*" ("Against" 458; my emphasis).

In other words, Cohen invents the grounds for his concept of science, and from Scholem's notes, it appears that Scholem and Benjamin

devoted much of their time in the summer of 1918 to elaborating this invention. For Cohen, the relativity of results is methodologically essential to establishing the unity of science, which he conceives on the difference internal to our concept formation and necessary to ensure that our representations of the world do not fall into empty logicism or blind psychologism: “Every *ens* must be a *quale*” (KTE 74). With regard to a priori entities such as space, however, “the question of How [*Wie*] in the sense of *Quale* (what properties does it have) is completely meaningless” (“Against” 457), since in them nothing is encountered that belongs to sensation: their “reality” *viz.* objective validity is demonstrated insofar as they are shown to be given a priori in order to ground all intuitions. Yet since it is presumed that “I can ask ‘How’ of every entity” (“Against” 457), Kant asks how a priori entities are *possible* independently of the constitution of our sensibility. Given in the transcendental exposition, the question of possibility ensures that the answer appears in the form of a synthetic judgment: the representation of a priori entities is nothing at all as soon as we leave aside the limitation that things are only given as objects of our sensible intuition.<sup>14</sup>

According to Scholem, however, this last step towards the transcendental ideality of space is “deviously acquired”<sup>15</sup> through a logical fallacy in which the transcendental is inserted into the syllogism as an illicit *fourth term*.<sup>16</sup> The conclusion that a priori entities may only

<sup>14</sup>The corresponding passage in the “Transcendental exposition of the concept of space” reads as follows: “Our expositions accordingly teach the reality (i.e., objective validity) of space in regard to everything that can come before us externally as an object, but at the same time the ideality of space in regard to things when they are considered in themselves through reason, i.e., without taking account of the constitution of our sensibility. We therefore assert the empirical reality of space (with respect to all possible outer experience), though to be sure its transcendental ideality, i.e., that it is nothing as soon as we leave aside the condition of the possibility of all experience, and take it as something that grounds the things in themselves.” —Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Trans. and ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) A28/B44 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *CPR*).

<sup>15</sup>Scholem calls the “transcendental” a “magical concept,” and elsewhere refers to the “devious acquisition” as “incest” (“On Kant” 444), “perversion,” and the “ontological proof of god for the devil” (*TB* II: 274–5).

<sup>16</sup>Cohen devotes part of the last section of the first chapter of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* to his rebuttal of Herbart’s charge that Proposition 2 of Kant’s metaphysical exposition of space contains a *quaternio terminorum*, in which the necessity of space as a priori intuition is introduced alongside the necessity of space as reality implied by objects. Here Scholem is probably proposing that Cohen’s rebuttal, which claims that Kant switches between apriority and reality in order to introduce the distinction between synthetic and analytic judgments, contains its own version of a *quaternio terminorum* (KTE 121).

be asked meaningfully of their possibility, which assures that they are conceivable only under the condition of the possibility of all experience and in synthetic a priori judgment, is drawn from the (minor) premise that it is meaningless to ask of a priori entities *how* they appear to us, in the sense of *Quale*. That is, the equivocation that has taken place, whereby the same word, “*Wie*,” is used to mean both *Quale* [*wie beschaffen*] and possibility [*wie möglich*], leads to the assumption that just because something does not appear in actuality, it must not be possible. The uncovering of this “devious acquisition” reveals the “possibility of all experience” to be without premise—in the sense that the transcendental ideality of space is defined as its being “nothing at all” beyond the human condition. If Scholem is correct, then it follows that the possibility of all other cognitions that determine the properties of space, such as those of geometry, is also the effect of a terminological intervention with the effect that these cognitions are assumed to be necessarily synthetic a priori yet incapable of grasping the real. The relation between concept and thing and thus the possibility of the object, too, would come down to a fact of language, by which an immediate link is arbitrarily sought between the way an object appears to us and how it is possible.

Thus, when Cohen attempts “on page 114” of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* to explain that Kant introduces the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments in order to “oppose” Leibniz’s grounding of certainty and necessity on analysis alone, Scholem argues that “Kant did not succeed in demonstrating that the prescription of the problem of synthetic a priori judgments is *necessary*” (“Against” 459). For Cohen, Kant’s assertion that the a priori entity, space, accompanies all outer intuitions as a fact of consciousness *viz.* “other moment of *sensibility*” (*KTE* 110; my emphasis) is based on the notion that geometrical entities, to cite Cohen citing from Kant’s Inaugural Dissertation, are “uniquely” mathematical<sup>17</sup>, distinct from logic, and must therefore be grounded on a representation of space that is itself presumed to be an intuition a priori (*KTE* 114). For Scholem, the intuitive character of space is “something to be postulated [*Forderndes*]” in order to serve the answer to the “transcendental” question of what space “*achieves* for science”; it is acquired from the equivocation that takes place when we neglect to ask exactly what we “*mean* when we talk about space”

<sup>17</sup>“So wird von der *evidentia* in den geometrischen Demonstrationen gesagt, sie sei nicht blos *maxima*, sondern *unica*, omnisque evidentiae in aliis *exemplar*” (*KTE* 114).



(“Against” 458): concept or intuition.<sup>18</sup> And if mathematics, for Cohen’s Kant, is presumed to be the essential mediator between logic and the real, then the “fact of science” is also a “postulate” according to which the unity of knowledge is guaranteed by the history of its terms under the constraint placed by the constitution of our sensibility on the analyzability of the world.

#### IV. *Eineindeutigkeit*

But the idea that mathematical truths can be delivered by “literary proof” (*KTE* 78) is also the “reversal of a deep thought” (“Against” 458). It points, at the very least, towards the possibility of another, more rigorous relation between “mathematics and language, i.e., mathematics and thinking” (*Briefe* II: 128): one which might account for how being, reality and world could correspond with and provide a model for that which can only be “postulated.” To begin, Scholem suggests, one might examine nature of the “postulate” by which Cohen “deviously acquires” the possibility of objective cognition. Everything that Cohen says about scientificity proceeds from the presupposition that “propositions” are the “genuine exemplars of synthetic a priori propositions proceeding from construction” (*KTE* 123), and that therefore mathematical concepts emerge immediately from and within their “construction” *viz.* intuition (“Against” 460). Following Trendelenburg, who argued that Kant fails to account for how space must be grounded as representation solely in forms of our sensibility (in Kant’s terms, that we must represent space as infinite given magnitude containing an infinite set of possible differentiations “within itself”)<sup>19</sup>, Cohen proposes that we can nonetheless assume

<sup>18</sup>In his diary entry of July 24, 1918, Scholem defines the “*Methode des Erschleichens*” as follows: “What is A? Cohen does not know and answers by decreeing A to be something to be postulated [*Forderunges*]—by dint of which his ‘methodical’ position, which now means his reality, is to be secured. This is the ontology of the devil. The reality of that which lacks an object [*Gegenstandslosen*] is proven by the *postulate* of methodological unity” (*TB* II: 274).

<sup>19</sup>Cohen explains his position on the thinkability versus representability of space as “infinite given magnitude” in context of his interpretation of Trendelenburg’s controversy with Kuno Fischer, in which Trendelenburg’s real objection to Proposition 4, according to Cohen, lies in his claim that the infinity of extension can only be grasped in a concept, as potential infinity, given the limitations of representation, and that therefore space cannot be an intuition conceived as actual infinity *qua* infinite given magnitude (*KTE* 129). Cohen had written an intervention on the controversy in 1871, the same year he devoted a book-length answer to the debate in the form of the first edition of his *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*. As Cohen writes in his essay “Zur Controverse zwischen Trendelenburg und Kuno Fischer” (in *Schriften zur Philosophie und Zeitgeschichte*, 2 vols., ed. Albert Görland and Ernst Cassirer [Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1928]) “Trendelenburg



we have the authority to represent the actual infinity of differentiations in space, because only by assuming that they correspond to “arbitrary divisions corresponding to scientific ends” that set “limitations” on what can be considered my “own” space does the manifold of possibilities arise with apodictic certainty (*KTE* 123). The immediacy between mathematical cognition and the object, which Cohen calls “intuition-certainty” (*KTE* 124), and thus the discoverability of the principles with which we may construct being in the observable world, are afforded by an intuitive conception of space which presumes for purposes of method that space is a set containing an “actual infinity” (*KTE* 128) of possible intuitable constructions. In the interest of serving the ends of science, Cohen derives from the proposition that space must precede every experience as a priori intuition—“one cannot represent that there is no space” (Proposition 2; *CPR* A24/B38)—the conclusion that we can assume, for the purpose of method alone but with scientific efficacy, to “represent [space as] infinite given magnitude” (Proposition 4; *CPR* A25/B40). The validity of a priori intuitions *vis-à-vis* the world requires a concept of relation that could bring with it a principle of its own infinity, and for Cohen, Kant’s fourth proposition lends itself by virtue of its “freely constructive nature” as a postulate of “progress into the infinite” (*KTE* 126).

As Scholem points out, however, Cohen acquires the intuitability of the “proposition” by confusing thinking with representing (“Against” 460). It is from a collusion of the need to assume we can represent infinite differentiation, and the restriction that we may regard as possible only that which presents itself to us qualitatively, that Cohen is led to the concept that space must not be a concept (regarded as a composite of empirical representations) but an a priori intuition understood as the principle of differentiation *tout court*. The internal differentiation that intuition represents for Cohen, however, excludes the possibility of any cognition that is not synthetic a priori, as well as the possibility that mathematics might grasp the kind of infin-

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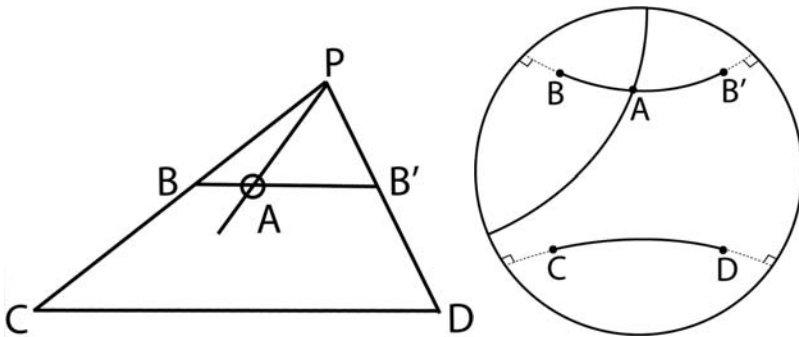
demonstrates that Kant, in his arguments in favor of the exclusive subjectivity of space and time, had left a gap” (I: 231): Kant, so Trendelenburg, fails to account for how space must not just precede every experience as pure and a priori, but is also grounded as representation solely in forms of our sensibility, as the modification of sensibility taking place solely within us. (I: 234) This is an estimation with which Cohen agrees, moreover, to the extent that he formulates the need to identify a new “starting point” (I: 270) which the critical historian must adopt in order to understand Kant “today,” as it were, and avoid “rebuking *Kant* himself for his ‘a priori magic,’ his ‘fantastic concepts’ and other like objectivities” (I: 272). To what extent Scholem’s and Benjamin’s study of Cohen in the summer of 1918 and beyond actually amounts to an intervention in the Trendelenburg-Fischer debate would need to be the subject of another investigation.

ity of which intuition is the principle, since it is methodologically necessary to regard a priori intuition as “nothing at all” beyond the limit of analyzability. Underlying all of this, therefore, is a concept of mathematics that is limited to what may be perceptible, such as the infinite addition of the number of times an object falls. For a student of mathematics such as Scholem, the “false[ness] of the concepts of perception, mathematics,” as well as “of the concept itself” which leads to conceiving of space as intuition (“Against” 461) would have been difficult to miss. If the space of mathematics *per se* could be represented, one would be able to represent space with no objects at all—the world would be the fact that in a triangle two sides together are always greater than the third. Consistent spaces exceeding the “infinite given magnitude” must therefore be conceivable—“one can very well think [that there is no space] without absurdity” (“Against” 460)—which indicates that mathematical space cannot be coextensive with the space of perception. Insofar as “pure intuition” is defined on presuming that mathematical space and perceptible space are immediately co-extensive, “[the space of] intuition *per se* is to be contested” (“Against” 456). For this reason, Kant’s concept of space must be fundamentally revised, since on his own terms the “space” in which all possible spaces are conceivable must both precede and exceed intuition, as well as the concept of concept *qua* a posteriori, *relative* synthesis, or counting falling objects, from which it was concluded that space must be “single,” “unique,” and contain an infinite set of its own modifications within “itself.”

Thus, for Scholem, Cohen’s grounds for grounding cognition are “absolutely obscure” because whatever else “construction” means, it serves as a “mystical terminus” with which Cohen hopes to “fill in the gap in Kant”<sup>20</sup> with a “weak concept of mathematics” (“Against” 459). In fact, prior to mathematics’ apparent “intuition-certainty” is a “mix-up”: “it is not the *proposition* that  $a + b > c$  is in the triangle—a proposition generated *only* in the categories—that can be seen, but the *state of affairs*” (“Against” 460), a disposition of things at a given time or place that one must presuppose in order that the relations between things be pictured in a proposition, or, in the term’s original

<sup>20</sup>With this phrase, Scholem is referring the title of one of Trendelenburg’s essays pertaining to his debate with Fischer: “Über eine Lücke in Kants Beweis von der ausschliessenden Subjektivität des Raumes und der Zeit,” in *Historische Beiträge zur Philosophie* 3 (1867): 215–76).

usage, in a case on trial.<sup>21</sup> However else “states of affairs” might stand in relation to the contemporaneous mathematics that threatened to undermine Kant’s third and fourth propositions on the concept of space, Scholem’s replacement of “propositions” with “states of affairs” as the entities that are immediately intuited in mathematical cognition suggests a concept of space in which mathematics might not construct but rather be constructed on the sensible world, perhaps thereby attaining to what Benjamin called “infinite *absolute* (not relative) synthesis” (GSVI: 52). To illustrate, Scholem makes a drawing and accompanying set of notes on the reverse side of his remarks “On Kant”:



The figure on the left, drawn by Scholem, effectively illustrates the definition of space as an infinite given magnitude in Proposition 4 of Kant’s metaphysical exposition. As Scholem notes, all the segments are “equivalent,” which, as he explains in the accompanying notes, means in contemporary terminology that they are of the same “cardinality”: if conceived as sets of points, all line segments in this space have the same number of elements in the set, each one of which (X) can be paired with exactly one element of another set (Y). The fact that there can therefore be an inverse mapping from Y to X as well guarantees that there exists a bijection, or “*eindeutig umkehrbare Beziehung*,” from

<sup>21</sup>*Sachverhalt* originally referred to the “state of things [*status rerum*]” or disposition of events and circumstances as pertaining to a case raised in a trial. Husserl’s student Adolf Reinach, who was also the author of a work that anticipated speech act theory, gave the first definitive formulation of logic as a *Sachverhalt*-based science, in which propositional meanings are clearly distinguished from *Sachverhalte* and the latter are conceived in their totality as the a priori realm of truth-making, objective correlates to all possible judgments. Archival and other documents show that both Benjamin and Scholem were familiar with the major works of this short-lived trend in German philosophy around the First World War.

X to Y and vice versa. In terms of Kant's definition of space as pure intuition in Proposition 4, "all the parts of space, even to infinity, are simultaneous" (*CPR* B40). The space in which the propositions accruing to this triangle are valid is one in which the bijective function as represented by the ray PA exists between the elements of segments BB and CD. In geometric terms this means that the interior angles on the same side of the line PA as it intersects BB and CD will always add up to the sum of two right angles, that is, that they will never intersect, and that they therefore exist in a space in which the Parallel Postulate holds, namely Euclidean space.

As the figure on the right illustrates,<sup>22</sup> however, "the ray through P and A does not in fact *need* to meet CD" if redrawn in a different space. "[I]f A corresponded to the point at infinity," which in the second diagram is denoted by any point on the edge of the disk, then the ray P may intersect CD "at  $\infty$ ." The construction that places points on the segments BB and CD in a bijective *viz.* one-to-one correspondence in the Euclidean plane thus breaks down in another plane—in the case here, a hyperbolic space or concave surface, in which at least "several," and in fact " $(\infty)$  parallels to a straight line are possible" due to the nature of its curvature. Transferring the problem to the question of infinite *sets*, likely for the same reason Scholem transitions from the inadequacy of the concept of intuition to a need to investigate the concept of concept, Scholem then wonders whether the segments are in fact "equivalent"—that is, of the same "cardinality," and thus whether "all the parts of space, even to infinity, are simultaneous." Given that in a different geometry the correspondence between the sets of points might only be an *injective* function, or "*eindeutige Funktion*," by which each element in one set (X) is only mapped *at most* to one element in set (Y) and does not have an inverse function from Y to X, the answer for Scholem seems to be a "no." As Scholem notes, the "set of all injective functions  $f(x), 0 \leq x \leq 1$ " is "*not* equivalent to that of the continuum": the set of all functions from  $[0, 1]$  into the real numbers is of a strictly larger cardinality than that of the real numbers, i.e., the values representing quantities on a continuum. The set of all functions between real numbers, "however little differentiated," contains the same number of elements as does the set of all values representing quantities on the continuum; thus the set of all mappings

<sup>22</sup>This figure was not drawn by Scholem himself, and is conceived as a visualization of the fragmentary remarks Scholem makes on hyperbolic space.

of the values between any two real numbers, however close together, into the set of real numbers, will have a larger cardinality than the continuum. Only by restricting this collection of (injective) functions to “the set of all *continuous*” functions does one have a set—the set of all *continuous* functions from  $[0, 1]$  into the real numbers—that is of the same cardinality as the real numbers and thus has the same number of elements as the continuum. However close together, two real numbers will have the same number of elements between them as there are elements in the continuum, which is to say that however close together, or however many, the fundamental elements of space do not “add up” to a continuity, or as Kant says, to an “essentially singular,” “unique” space (CPRA25/B39), since something will always come “in between.” Continuity must be (and has been) conceived differently. Prior to extension, motion or force, prior even to the difference between two elements, is a principle of differentiation from the infinite possibility of construction, being, and world.

Whatever else Scholem had in mind with these mathematical notes, the following is clear with respect to the critique of Cohen’s exposition of Kantian space: neither intuition a priori, nor a general concept “space” under which particular spaces are gathered, suffice to express the principle from which space is derived. This principle is, namely, a differentiation whose “infinity,” as Benjamin says of the “task tasked to science” and in language appropriate to its domain, is of a “higher power-cardinality [*höherer Mächtigkeit*]”<sup>23</sup> than the infinite set of representations deemed *possible* under the limitations of sensibility. Thus space is inconceivable as the set of differentiations within itself to the extent that these differentiations are conceived as “simultaneous” *viz.* equivalent “even to infinity” under the restriction of their possibility *vis-à-vis* the sensible world. If the two diagrams picture the same triangle, assuring their “sameness” is not an “intuition-certainty” deriving from the metrical equivalence of all parts within a single

<sup>23</sup>In other words, Benjamin borrows the mathematical term *Mächtigkeit* from Georg Cantor’s transfinite set theory, where “power” refers the cardinality of a set in the sense I have explained above. The phrase “higher power” thus refers neither to the mathematical operation of exponentiation, by which a number can be said to be “to the power of  $n$ ” if repeatedly multiplied  $n$  times (the German term for which is *Potenz*), nor to “power” in any non-mathematical sense (such as *Macht*). Peter Fenves has discussed the transference of terms from set theory into Benjamin’s concepts of knowledge and experience in his book *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); see especially Chapter 6, “Pure Knowledge and the Continuity of Experience: ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’ and Its Supplements” (152–86).

all-encompassing space, nor the intuitability of propositions such as would predispose the lengths of two sides of any conceivable triangle to be greater than the third, but a “disposition” regarding the relation between the two apparently dissimilar entities. In the case of the Euclidean space that Newtonian mathematical natural science presupposes, a bijection [*Eineindeutigkeit*], a relation of one-to-one invertible correspondence, establishes the “uniqueness” and “simultaneity” of all parts of space. The all-encompassing, essentially singular space underlying the neo-Kantian concept of science, so Scholem suggests, does not mediate between logic and reality because it is intrinsically “sensible” and “constructive,” but because a restriction is placed on the set of its functions that they be continuous and correspond, as it were, to experiential space. This “state of affairs,” the idea for which Scholem borrows from the lexicon of contemporaneous philosophy, retains certain of its juridical provenance to the extent that it must be presupposed as a nexus prior to all possibility and as such must authorize any cognition of the world. The question, then, is what other concept of space arises after intuition is removed from its premises. With regard to *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, however, because “false concepts of perception, mathematics and of the concept itself” are still operative, “the question remains great, but *unresolved*” (“Against” 461).

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Upon reading Cohen’s *Prinzip der Infinitesimalmethode* in April 1918, just a month before arriving in Bern, Scholem remarks in his diary that “mathematical natural science precisely does *not* have a given fact, but rather a well-founded nexus of justification [*wohlbegründeter Begründungszusammenhang*] that has *not* fallen from the sky, as its absolute point of reference [*Ort*]” (*TB* II: 170). Cohen, however, attempts to construct the concept of science in denial of the force of law in the realm of truth-making and in advocacy solely for the methodological necessity of intuition’s apriority. Under the restriction of human experience, so Scholem continues upon starting Cohen’s *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* a few days later, it “remains entirely unclear (because terminologically devious [*erschlichen*])” what lends “inner judicial authority [*Gerichtsamt*] [. . .] of the origin” to our cognitions of being, reality and world, for though “everything is only postulated” and in pragmatic terms “is great and true as this postulate,” “it is not grounded.” Under the human condition, “building a logic with pos-

ulates (in the Euclidean sense)” is, so Scholem concludes, “a daring, all too daring enterprise” (*TB* II: 177).

For as Scholem notes, Cohen interprets the history *viz.* content of science as a direct and transhistorical confirmation of the principle behind Kant’s Copernican turn: that science produces its own experience. For Cohen, representations [*Vorstellungen*] are produced by the binding character of consciousness, as if consciousness were “an apparatus [*Geräth*] that produces the conjunctions” of sense impressions, and space and time the “tools for the forming and fixing of our representations”: we can therefore know a priori of things only what we ourselves put into them (*KTE* 84). The Copernican turn thus represents for Cohen the priority of thought over being, which in turn translates as the self-motivated regularity of the law in general to the extent that the “guiding star” of legitimacy, the “highest principle,” derives immediately from the “recognition of the fact of mathematical natural science *as opposed to* the metaphysics of morals”: for in mathematics, it is implied, all experience “shall” be legitimate because mathematics is the “fact of science” in which logic and ethics are unified (*KTE* 139; my emphasis). According to Scholem’s notes on Cohen’s *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, however, the “comparison with an apparatus” is “absurd” (“Against” 459), and the account of the necessity and universality of our experience “the height of nonsense”:

Page 139 in Cohen is the height of nonsense. Link between logic and ethics: the law *shall* be!!! [ . . . ] And on what grounds shall it be? Not along the lines of morals, but rather—the highest principle *shall* exist because of the “fact of science” and thus because of Newton! Because the earth revolves around the sun! The entire passage is groundless. We “*want*” to recognize necessity—as if there were a logical willing where there isn’t even a logical must. (“Against” 457–58)

The conflation of mathematics and metaphysics under the sign of natural science represents “the climax of the epistemological swindle” perpetrated by Cohen, which, as Scholem notes in his diary on July 26, 1918, culminates in Benjamin’s “very nice” summary of Cohen’s book: “I ask not—I postulate—It is valid [*Ich frage nicht—Ich fordere—Es gilt*]” (*TB* II: 276). For if Cohen presents science as the achievement of the *history* of science, whose “progressive culture of the spirit” determines the content filling in an otherwise predetermined form of scientific experience, science (and the philosophy whose “highest principle” derives immediately from science) is inadvertently inflated into a “logical willing [*logisches Wollen*]—a logical counterpart, it appears, to Alois

Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen*,<sup>24</sup> and according to which, so Scholem notes, a principle *shall* exist because of the “fact of science”—because of the “fact of Newton,” because of the “fact” that the earth revolves around the sun, and because that fact of Newtonian science asserts, in Cohen's estimation, the priority of “scientific method” for the unity of thought and being. The achievement of Newtonian science translates for Cohen as our “wanting” to recognize the “facts” of nature and discovery as such and as necessary. Construed as *logisches Wollen*, the purposiveness of scientific judgments ends up (in Scholem's notes) in a conflation of logic and ethics whereby a *Wollen / Sollen* replaces a *Müssen* that has yet to exist.

As a result, the content of our experience, to the extent that for Cohen's Kant this is co-extensive with scientific experience, is regulated by a principle of history whose ultimate reference point is the “highest principle” of mathematics, and which, accordingly, takes the form of a succession of discoveries, each one anticipating the next, each progressively less of one than the one prior to it, each a link in a chain of succession that progressively becomes construed as “fact” at the same time as these “facts” are nothing other than the *form* of experience becoming progressively inflated as a *will* to history—and deflated into a sort of prophetic anticipation. Thus, Scholem notes, we see Cohen write sentences such as this: “In this way Leibniz ripens, purified by Hume, into the philosopher reinforced in Newton: Kant” (“Against” 458). In conflating the “highest principle”—the principle that experience “shall” be legitimate—with the principle of the “historical” determinations of its content, Cohen equates the principle of experience with its form, such that the principle is proven in the “fact” of whatever representation it takes: in the “literary proof” of the terms selected as fundamental concepts of our cognition, for instance (*KTE* 78; “Against” 458). To this apparent, though “groundless” imposition of a “logical willing,” which is paler than authorial intention yet more vivid than the “fact of science,” Scholem thus gives an apostrophe in the manner of a loud whisper: “(Style!)” (“Against” #)

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<sup>24</sup>Benjamin had come across Alois Riegl's works by the late 1910's, and certainly Riegl's *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, in which he explicates the concept of *Kunstwollen*, was highly influential for Benjamin's early writings, as he states in a posthumously published curriculum vitae. Cf. Benjamin, “Drei Lebensläufe,” in *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) 51.