

Völkerpsychologie and the Origins of Hermann Cohen's Anti-Psychologism¹

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Scott Edgar

scott.edgar@smu.ca

ABSTRACT: Some commentators on Hermann Cohen have remarked on what they take to be a puzzle about the origins of his mature anti-psychologism. When Cohen was young, he studied a kind of psychology, the Völkerpsychologie of Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal, and wrote apparently psychologistic accounts of knowledge almost up until the moment he first articulated his anti-psychologistic neo-Kantianism. To be sure, Cohen's mature anti-psychologism does constitute a rejection of certain central commitments of Völkerpsychologie. However, the relation between Völkerpsychologie and Cohen's mature anti-psychologism is not one of straightforward opposition. This paper argues that Cohen had significantly less distance to travel than it appears to get from his early Völkerpsychologie to his mature anti-psychologism. In particular, this paper argues that Cohen always had an anti-psychologistic account of knowledge, even during the period when he was studying Völkerpsychologie, and further, that key features of his Völkerpsychologie partly shaped his mature account of knowledge. Finally, the paper identifies how Cohen's views did change over the transition from his völkerpsychological period to his later anti-psychologism. It thus identifies what changes in Cohen's views *do* need to be explained.

§1. Introduction.

Hermann Cohen, the Marburg School neo-Kantian, stands at the head of the tradition of neo-Kantian anti-psychologism that came to dominate German-language philosophy in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Anti-psychologism is the

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view that philosophical questions about knowledge are independent of psychological considerations and cannot be answered using the methods of empirical psychology. Prior to Cohen, almost all neo-Kantians defended the opposite view, arguing that psychology was the proper method to carry out a Kantian investigation of knowledge. In opposition to those predecessors, starting in 1871, Cohen defended an anti-psychologistic vision of Kantian philosophy, and over the next two decades anti-psychologism became orthodoxy within neo-Kantianism and German-language philosophy more generally. Thus to understand the origins of anti-psychologism in German philosophy, we must understand how Cohen came to defend it.

However, there appears to be a puzzle -- what Ulrich Sieg calls a “riddle” (Sieg 2004: 461) -- about the origins of Cohen’s anti-psychologism. Cohen spent years training in a kind of psychology called *Völkerpsychologie*.² Developed by two Herbartian psychologists named Moritz (Moses) Lazarus and Heymann (Chajim) Steinthal, *Völkerpsychologie* was a predecessor to social psychology and cultural anthropology. Lazarus and Steinthal’s aim was to develop a sub-discipline of psychology that could provide accounts of the psychological character of whole societies or peoples. Cohen spent years training in *Völkerpsychologie* with Steinthal. Cohen even published essays in the journal that Steinthal and Lazarus edited together, the *Journal of Völkerpsychologie and Linguistics*. Indeed, Cohen was publishing in *Völkerpsychologie* almost until the moment he first articulated his Kantian anti-psychologism. Frederick Beiser argues that this apparent about-face had to have happened in a matter of months (Beiser 2015: 470). Hence the riddle: if Cohen really did make this philosophical about-face, why did he do so and how did

² The closest English translation of ‘*Völkerpsychologie*’ is ‘folk psychology.’ But since in contemporary Anglophone philosophy, ‘folk psychology’ has a well-entrenched but entirely unrelated meaning, I will simply leave ‘*Völkerpsychologie*’ untranslated.

it happen so quickly?

I do not here aim to solve this riddle. Rather, I propose to question how much of a riddle it really is. Some commentators' attempts to explain Cohen's rapid conversion to anti-psychologism have presented Völkerpsychologie and Cohen's anti-psychologism in straightforward opposition to one another.³ And to be sure, central commitments of Cohen's anti-psychologism are inconsistent with central commitments of the program of Völkerpsychologie. Nevertheless, I aim to show that this picture of a straightforward opposition between Völkerpsychologie and Cohen's mature anti-psychologism is too simple.

More specifically, I am to do three things. First, I aim to show that Cohen never *converted* to anti-psychologism, for the simple reason that his theory of knowledge was always, even during the period of his research in Völkerpsychologie, anti-psychologistic.⁴ Second, I aim

³ See especially the accounts of Poma 1997 and Beiser 2015. Köhnke 1991 and Sieg 2004 have similar if more nuanced views. While both see in Cohen's Völkerpsychologie anticipations of some of his mature doctrines, for example, his interpretation of Plato (see also Köhnke 2001 and Adelman 1999), Köhnke nevertheless sees in Cohen a rapid transition from a psychologistic Kantianism to an anti-psychologistic one (Köhnke 1991: 185) and Sieg does not argue against the view that Cohen made a rapid about face on the issue of psychologism.

⁴ On the specific point that Cohen *always had* an anti-psychologistic account of knowledge, my account follows those of Damböck 2017 and Beiser 2019 (which revises Beiser 2015 considerably). These accounts, including mine, may be seen as complements to interpretations that see the apriorism in Cohen's 1866 "The Platonic Doctrine of Ideas, Developed Psychologically" as a partial rejection of psychologism (Beiser 2019). Köhnke is equivocal on this point: like Beiser (2019) he sees Cohen's Plato interpretation as anticipating Cohen's *Kantianism* (Köhnke 2001), but he nevertheless sees that Kantianism as psychologistic (Köhnke 1991). Likewise, my account compliments interpretations that deny a rapid about face in Cohen's thinking about psychology: both Schmidt 1976 and Edel 2010 argue that Cohen's concern with psychology extended at least into the first, 1871 edition of *Kant's Theory of Experience*.

to show that Völkerpsychologie was, in some ways, a positive influence on Cohen's later anti-psychologistic account of knowledge, and was part of the immediate intellectual background that shaped Cohen's mature account of knowledge. And third, I want to identify how Cohen's views *did* change in the transition from his völkerpsychological period to his later anti-psychologism. I thus aim to identify what changes in Cohen's views *do* need to be explained.

To these ends, in §§2-3 I introduce the project of Völkerpsychologie, in both Lazarus and Steinthal's and Cohen's early writing. Then in §4, I sketch some of the key features of Cohen's anti-psychologism as he articulated it in the context of the project he called the "critique of knowledge." In §5, I identify several significant points of continuity between Cohen's early project and his later critique of knowledge. In §6, I argue that there are nevertheless two fundamental differences between Cohen's views during his early period studying Völkerpsychologie and his critique of knowledge. I conclude in §7 by showing how Cohen had much less distance to travel to get from his Völkerpsychologie to his critique of knowledge than Sieg and others suggest. Finally, I argue that the real transition in his thought was a shift from an anti-psychologistic conception of philosophy inspired by J.F. Herbart to one inspired by Kant.

§2. *Lazarus and Steinthal's Völkerpsychologie.*

Lazarus and Steinthal defended their conception of Völkerpsychologie in the long introductory essay they wrote for the inaugural issue of their journal, "Introductory thoughts on Völkerpsychologie, as an invitation to a journal of Völkerpsychologie and linguistics," which appeared in 1860.

On Lazarus and Steinthal's account, Völkerpsychologie is distinguished from individual psychology, most fundamentally, by its aims. Individual psychology investigates the lower

cognitive and perceptual functions that occupied German-language (individual) psychology and the physiology of the sense organs in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is concerned with, for example, the perception of space, colour, objects, and tones. In contrast, *Völkerpsychologie* investigates the higher cultural representations of human societies. Those higher cultural achievements include language, as well as representations in: myth and religion; art, music, and poetry; ethics and law; and science (Lazarus and Steinthal 1860: 1).

Lazarus and Steinthal argue that, because the higher representations that concern *Völkerpsychologie* are the achievements of whole peoples, the psychology of individual minds is inadequate to account for them. Their conception of individual psychology is inherited from Herbart. Like him, they conceive of individual psychology as a natural science concerned with the mechanistic, lawful processes in human minds (Lazarus and Steinthal 1860: 16). But, they are quick to point out, not even Herbart took individual psychology to provide a comprehensive psychological account of human mental capacities: Herbart acknowledges that “psychology always remains only one-sided, so long as it considers the human as standing alone” (Herbart 1834: §240; quoted in Lazarus and Steinthal 1860: 4).

Further, for Lazarus and Steinthal, explaining a people’s higher cultural representations requires tracing those representations’ origins and development. *Völkerpsychologie* is thus necessarily a historical discipline (Lazarus and Steinthal 1860: 63ff). The essentially historical character of *Völkerpsychologie* is borne out in every issue of Lazarus and Steinthal’s journal. Strikingly, then, while Lazarus and Steinthal insist that higher cultural representations can be explained only by moving beyond individual psychology, they conceive of that move as requiring a turn to history.

However, as Martin Kusch (forthcoming) has argued, other commitments of Lazarus and

Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie* are more ambiguous. We must note three of those ambiguities, if only briefly.

First, Lazarus and Steinthal at times suggest that *Völkerpsychologie* aims to discover laws that are not causal-mechanical, but rather, laws that describe a people's "inner, spiritual, or ideal activity (Lazarus and Steinthal 1860: 15-16; cf. 7). But when they discuss the psychological processes that *Völkerpsychologie* investigates (for example, "apperception" or "compression"), they sometimes suggest that those processes are continuous with, or even identical to, the processes described by individual psychology (Lazarus and Steinthal 1860: 10-11).⁵

Second, Lazarus and Steinthal's account is ambiguous on the question of whether or not *Völkerpsychologie* is explanatorily autonomous from individual psychology. If *Völkerpsychologie* discovers laws of a fundamentally different kind than those discovered by individual psychology, then *völkerpsychological* explanations cannot be reduced to individual-psychological explanations.⁶ But if *Völkerpsychologie* describes processes that are continuous with those described by individual psychology, then *völkerpsychological* explanation might be continuous with individual-psychological explanation. In this case, *Völkerpsychologie* might be partly reducible to individual psychology.

Third, there is an ambiguity in the extent to which Lazarus and Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie* has relativistic consequences.⁷ If *völkerpsychological* explanations are (even partly) reducible to individual-psychological explanations, then higher cultural representations

⁵ See Beiser 2015 for an interpretation of apperception and compression that emphasizes Lazarus and Steinthal's mechanistic conception of them.

⁶ See Damböck 2017: 70ff for an interpretation of Steinthal that highlights the explanatory autonomy of *Völkerpsychologie* from individual psychology.

⁷ Cf. Kusch forthcoming for a fuller discussion.

will be subject to the same relativity that characterizes representations in individual minds. But if Völkerpsychologie is explanatorily autonomous from individual psychology, that suggests that higher cultural representations might be independent of the variation between their instantiations in individual minds.

These ambiguities make it difficult to characterize Lazarus and Steinthal's views precisely. Fortunately, we need not let that trip us up, because for our purposes what is more important is the larger philosophical context in which Steinthal in particular conceives of his Völkerpsychologie. For Steinthal, during the period he cowrote his programmatic essay with Lazarus, Völkerpsychologie constitutes only one side of a complete account of knowledge. Five years earlier, in his *Grammar, Logic, and Psychology*, Steinthal drew a distinction between psychology (including Völkerpsychologie) and *logic*, and insisted that logic is entirely independent of psychological considerations. That is, despite his account of the explanations Völkerpsychologie provides of higher cultural representations, Steinthal has an *anti-psychologistic* conception of logic.

Among his other aims in *Grammar, Logic, and Psychology*, Steinthal is concerned to distinguish between logic and linguistics, which he conceives as a part of Völkerpsychologie. He argues that logic aims to define the standards of what counts as *judging*, and thus to make it possible to determine whether a given representation counts as a *thought*. On his view, the standards that determine what counts as judging and what counts as a thought are themselves intrinsic to thought itself (Steinthal 1855: 145). The way Steinthal explicates this claim emphasizes his anti-psychologism.

First, he claims that logic “merely clarifies” representations, that is, it determines that “if something is thought, it must be grasped thus and so” (Steinthal 1855: 146). Further, he draws an

explicit contrast between that clarificatory function of logic and the genetic explanations of language that linguistics and Völkerpsychologie provide. On this account, the logical analysis of a representation is entirely independent of a psychological account of its origins and development (Steinthal 1855: 146). Second, Steinthal insists that logic is *formal*. But he explicates this claim by drawing a distinction between thought considered as a *product* of thinking, and thought considered in connection with its “psychological arising” from thinking (Steinthal 1855: 146). That is, he draws a distinction between thought conceived as cognitive content, and thought conceived as a cognitive activity. For Steinthal, logic is concerned only with logic conceived as content. Thought conceived as a cognitive activity is the purview of psychology.⁸

For Steinthal, the project of Völkerpsychologie must be understood in this larger philosophical context. Psychology, including Völkerpsychologie, constitutes only one side of a complete account of knowledge and representation. The other side of that account is logic, a discipline that clarifies the cognitive contents of representations in order to determine whether they satisfy the requirements of thinking, and that does so entirely independently of psychology.⁹

⁸ A second way that Steinthal explicates the formality of logic also deserves mentioning, if only in passing. He insists that logic is unconcerned with determining whether the thought is true or false. It is concerned exclusively with determining whether a representation satisfies the “requirements of thinking,” and so counts as a thought properly so called -- regardless of its truth. He comes close to suggesting that those requirements of thinking determine a thought’s status as a truth-bearer, when he says that logic’s “laws constitute the foundation of truth” (Steinthal 1855: 146).

⁹ The domain of Steinthal’s anti-psychologism would expand. In his 1871 *Outline of Linguistics*, Steinthal claims that an empirical method is inappropriate not just in logic, but in other philosophical disciplines such as metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy of religion (Steinthal 1871: 7). I omit any discussion of Steinthal on these points, since this work appeared after Cohen’s early work on Völkerpsychologie, and thus does not speak to

In fact, Steinthal's view of psychology and logic as two, independent sides of a complete account of knowledge echoes Herbart's account of the task of philosophy in his 1813 *Introduction to Philosophy* and 1816 *Textbook in Psychology*. Herbart argues that the task of philosophy is the "re-working" of concepts (Herbart 1813: §§4-5). Concepts, considered pre-philosophically, can contain hidden contradictions. The principal part of philosophy, which is logic, seeks to find those contradictions, and to eliminate them by reworking the concepts (Herbart 1813: xii-xiii; §5). Logic's reworking of concepts is essentially clarificatory and thus, for Herbart, it stands in contrast to a genetic account of representation (what he calls "a natural history of the understanding" [Herbart 1816: 138]). What is more, even more explicitly than Steinthal would, Herbart conceives of logic as concerned exclusively with the *content* of representations, rather than the cognitive activity that gives rise to that content (Herbart 1816: 138).¹⁰ Consequently, for Herbart logic provides an account of representation that is entirely independent of psychology. Further, that anti-psychologistic account of representation is necessary for a complete philosophical account of knowledge and representation.

Steinthal thus has a very Herbartian view of Völkerpsychologie's place in a larger philosophical project. Whatever the ambiguities in Lazarus and Steinthal's conception of Völkerpsychologie, Steinthal at least sees it as only one part of a complete account of knowledge and representation, where the other part of that account is explicitly anti-psychologistic. Cohen, in his early writings on Völkerpsychologie, will take up this view of Völkerpsychologie and an anti-

how Steinthal influenced Cohen. See Damböck (2016: 67ff) for more detail on Steinthal on these points, and for a plausible suggestion that, on these points, Cohen might actually have been the one to influence Steinthal.

¹⁰ My account of Herbart here follows that of Hatfield 1990: Ch. 4.

psychologicistic logic, and in certain respects, will echo Herbart even more clearly than Steinthal does.

3. *Cohen's early Völkerpsychologie.*

Hints of Cohen's later views can be found in several of the essays that he published in Lazarus and Steinthal's journal.¹¹ However, for the purposes of considering Cohen's changing views on psychology and anti-psychologism, the most instructive statements of his early commitments appear in his essay, "Mythological Representations of God and Soul, Developed Psychologically," which appeared in two parts in Lazarus and Steinthal's journal, in 1868 and 1869.¹² It traces the origins of the concepts *god* and *soul* in mythologies of (mostly) Indo-European peoples, including the myths of the ancient Greeks, Indians, Celts, and the Norse, as well as Grimms' fairy tales. Much of Cohen's account consists of discussions of ancient peoples' experiences with fire, caused by lightning strikes or by rubbing pieces of wood together, and his consideration of the ways that fire was, in those peoples' myths, connected to the divine. However, the essay also contains very suggestive reflections on the aims and methods of psychology (both individual psychology and *Völkerpsychologie*), and the roles that psychology

¹¹ Arguments have been made that these essays anticipate Cohen's mature style of philosophical history (Sieg 2004), the centrality of a psychology of "cultural consciousness" to his mature System of Philosophy (Adelmann 1997; Sieg 2004; Damböck 2017), the Marburg School doctrine of the "generation" of the object of knowledge (Köhnke 1991), and Cohen's mature interpretation of Plato (Köhnke 2001; Sieg 2004; Beiser 2019).

¹² A complete account of Cohen's early views on anti-psychologism would have to include a detailed discussion of his early interpretation of Plato, and in particular, his view that knowledge (and in particular, discovery) requires a "significant a priori combination of the a posteriori material of knowledge" (Cohen 1866: 403). I do not here have the space to do these views justice, and for that reason the interpretation I offer here is incomplete.

can play in the service of philosophy. These reflections are vague: what follows in this section is an attempt to tease out the methodological views that Cohen's text only hints at.

Following Lazarus and Steinthal, Cohen takes *Völkerpsychologie* to be concerned with higher cultural representations. And even more explicitly than Steinthal, Cohen articulates a view of how *Völkerpsychologie* has value for a larger philosophical project. On his view, philosophers make the mistake of thinking their concepts are, as it were, ready-made. Natural scientists can make the same mistake about the concepts they use. But, Cohen insists, those concepts "have grown gradually in the consciousness of the human species" (Cohen 1868: 400).

Völkerpsychologie and allied historical disciplines, such as philology and comparative mythology, are necessary for philosophy and science, in order to identify the mythological traces that remain in philosophical and scientific concepts. Those historical and psychological disciplines are thus necessary for philosophy and science to "cast off their mythological fetters" (Cohen 1868: 400).

Underlying Cohen's view of *Völkerpsychologie*'s role for philosophy is a particular account of concept formation. That account emphasizes the strain of Lazarus and Steinthal's account that sees a strong continuity between *Völkerpsychologie* and individual psychology, as well as the causal-mechanical strain of their account.

Cohen describes psychological processes that begin with subjective sensations in individual minds, and that transform those sensations into representations that he calls objective. The more "detached from sensory content" those representations become, the more objective they are (Cohen 1868: 401; 420-1). Cohen is clear that the first stages of this process happen within the domain of individual psychology: echoing, for example, Hermann von Helmholtz and F.A. Lange, Cohen offers an account of how individuals come to represent properties of external

objects (Cohen 1868: 420). But as the process continues, it moves from the minds of individuals to the spirit of a people, where it enters the domain of Völkerpsychologie (Cohen 1868: 400). Higher cultural representations, Cohen seems to suggest, become still further removed from the sensory content of individual minds. Thus these higher cultural representations are still more objective than an individual's perceptions of external objects.¹³

Nevertheless, regardless of how far removed from an individual's sensory content a representation becomes, Cohen insists that it always retains some trace of that original sensory content, even if in "disguised form" (Cohen 1868: 421). It is thus the task of Völkerpsychologie to analyze higher cultural representations, in order to identify these disguised traces of subjectivity. Cohen strongly suggests that, in this regard, Völkerpsychologie's task is continuous with one task of individual psychology. Völkerpsychologie's analysis of a higher representation will result in simpler representations that can be analyzed by individual psychology. Then it would fall to individual psychology to explain how individual minds produce those simpler representations from subjective sensory content. For example, Cohen traces the concept *god* to, among other sources, early humans' perceptions of lightning (Cohen 1868: 407ff). That is as far as Völkerpsychologie takes the analysis. Then individual psychology explains humans'

¹³ Note, as we will discuss further in §5, Cohen's Völkerpsychologie already includes a commitment that is also a part of his anti-psychologism: the view that individual psychology is inadequate to account for objective representations. To the extent that Cohen's anti-psychologism is motivated principally by an anti-subjectivism, there is a plausible case that Völkerpsychologie – which deals exclusively with objective higher cultural representations – is already anti-psychologistic. (See Damböck 2017: 125-127 for a much better developed version of this account of Cohen.) Here, I want to resist that view, for the reason that, for Cohen, the objectivity of higher cultural representations is only *relative*: those representations still bear traces of their subjective origins. (More on this below.) Thus Völkerpsychologie, which studies these merely relatively objective representations, does not entirely escape the subjectivism that Cohen's anti-psychologism rejects decisively.

representation of lightning.

Further, Cohen's discussion strongly suggests that he sees both individual psychological processes and völkerpsychological processes as causal-mechanical. For example, he talks about the völkerpsychological processes as apperception, in Lazarus and Steinthal's causal-mechanical sense of that term.¹⁴

It is tempting to conclude from these views that Cohen holds some kind of historical relativism about higher cultural representations. On this view, even as representations move farther away from individual sensation, since they retain traces of subjectivity, they likewise retain some degree of idiosyncrasy and variability, and thus relativity.

In fact, Cohen only hints at the view that Völkerpsychologie produces a historical relativist account of higher cultural representations. He insists that at least some representations have a validity that is independent of any psychological analysis. He calls that validity "metaphysical validity" and says that it characterizes "logical" analysis (Cohen 1868: 399). Further, for Cohen this validity seems to stand in contrast with the status of representations as they are analyzed by Völkerpsychologie, suggesting that, on a völkerpsychological analysis, representations will always fall short of this kind of validity.

Thus Cohen does seem to suggest that Völkerpsychologie's analysis of higher cultural representations will be subject to some degree of historical relativism. But even while he suggests that, he insists that the representations themselves may have a validity that is independent of völkerpsychological considerations, and thus independent of those representations' use by any particular culture at any particular point in history. In other words, he insists that higher cultural representations have a validity that is universal.

¹⁴ See especially Cohen's discussion at 1868: 414 and 424-5.

Since for Cohen a representation's metaphysical validity is independent of psychological considerations, neither the methods of individual psychology nor Völkerpsychologie can be used to provide an account of that validity. For that reason, Cohen maintains that psychology (including Völkerpsychologie) must be complemented by a different discipline, one that he calls "deductive critique" (Cohen 1868: 398-9).

Cohen says very little about the methods of deductive critique, but what he does say echoes Herbart's view that the task of logic is the "reworking" of concepts (Herbart 1813: §§4-5), and likewise echoes Steinthal's view that logic is concerned with clarifying concepts.¹⁵ For Herbart, logic seeks out contradictions contained in concepts considered pre-philosophically, and then eliminates those contradictions by reworking the concepts. For Cohen, concepts can be vague and contain internal tensions and contradictions. Deductive critique has the task of analyzing apart the different components of a concept "in terms of its logical spontaneity and metaphysical power" (Cohen 1868: 398), in order to lay bare the sources of tension and contradiction. Cohen maintains that deductive critique will never be complete, as long as human thought continues to develop. For, he seems to suggest, each new innovation in human thinking introduces new concepts that then become the subject-matter of deductive critique (Cohen 1868: 398-9).

Further, Cohen argues that deductive critique and Völkerpsychologie are necessary complements to one another. Deductive critique is necessary because Völkerpsychologie's methods are insufficient for an analysis of a concept's metaphysical validity. But deductive critique also cannot ignore the origins of the concepts it analyzes, and so requires

¹⁵ The account I give here of the Herbartian provenance of Cohen's "deductive critique" contrasts with Beiser 2019, who sees "deductive critique" as Kantian and an early instance of what Cohen would later call the "critique of knowledge" (Beiser 2019: 34).

Völkerpsychologie's examination of those origins. Cohen also claims that Völkerpsychologie furnishes "new points of attack" for deductive critique (Cohen 1868: 399), perhaps by providing new concepts to be analyzed or by providing new suggestions about what tensions might lie hidden in a given concept.

Stepping back from the (very sketchy) details of Cohen's account of the relation between Völkerpsychologie and deductive critique, what is more important for our purposes is how explicitly he echoes Herbart's and Steinthal's conception of psychology (and in Steinthal's case, Völkerpsychologie) and logic as distinct, if complimentary, disciplines.¹⁶ Cohen endorses Lazarus and Steinthal's conception of Völkerpsychologie, but he insists that Völkerpsychologie so conceived must be complemented by a different discipline, one concerned with a validity of representations that is independent of psychological considerations and that investigates representations in terms of their logical properties and not the causal-mechanical processes by which they develop.

§4. Cohen's anti-psychologistic critique of knowledge.

Let's turn to Cohen's later views. He first defended an anti-psychologistic interpretation of Kant in 1871, in an essay that appeared in Lazarus and Steinthal's journal, "On the Controversy Between Trendelenburg and Kuno Fischer," and more importantly, in the first edition of his book, *Kant's Theory of Experience*. Winrich de Schmidt (1976) and, especially, Geert Edel (2010) argue persuasively that Cohen's attempt to pursue both psychological and anti-psychologistic aspects of an account of knowledge continued in the first, 1871 edition of *Kant's*

¹⁶ See Köhnke 2001 for an account of the ways Cohen's views in "Mythological Representations of God and Soul" are in certain respects un-Herbartian.

Theory of Experience (for example, in his contrast between different “levels” of the a priori that are, respectively, psychological and formal conditions of the possibility of experience.¹⁷ But over the course of the 1870s, his anti-psychologism became more pronounced.¹⁸ By the mid-1880s, Cohen was placing his anti-psychologism at the foreground of his philosophical investigation of knowledge. In 1883, in his *Principle of the Infinitesimal Method and its History*, and again in 1885, in the much-expanded second edition of his *Kant’s Theory of Experience*, Cohen defends a project he calls the “critique of knowledge.” He is at pains to distinguish this project from any psychological investigation of knowledge, and especially in the *Infinitesimal Method*, he announces his anti-psychologism explicitly in the earliest sections of the book (Cohen 1883: §§6-8).

Cohen emphasizes that his critique of knowledge cannot be provided by a psychological investigation of individual minds. In fact, his insistence that his investigation is a “critique” of knowledge signals his desire to foreground his anti-psychologism. In the introductory sections of the *Infinitesimal Method*, Cohen first distinguishes between psychology and “theory of knowledge” (Cohen 1883: §6). But then he concedes that in his time, the term “theory of knowledge” is used in ways that have irredeemably psychologistic implications. He thus gives up

¹⁷ I note here, but cannot pursue it, that Cohen’s attempts in the first edition of *Kant’s Theory of Experience* to bring together both psychological and anti-psychologistic accounts of knowledge raise the question of how to understand his conception of transcendental subjectivity and its relation to cognitive processes investigated by empirical psychology. My hope is that, here, I may avoid those interpretive questions by focusing on Cohen’s later views, when he had more clearly eliminated any concern with empirical psychology from his writings. For accounts of transcendental subjectivity in the first edition of *Kant’s Theory of Experience*, see Schmidt 1976: Ch. 2.2, Edel 2010: Ch. 2.22, and Beiser 2015: 12.7.

¹⁸ See especially Cohen’s *Kant’s Foundations of Ethics* 1877: 24-27.

the term entirely, in favour of his proprietary jargon, “critique of knowledge,” in order to underscore the anti-psychologistic commitment of his project (Cohen 1883: §7).

Further, for Cohen, as the critique of knowledge moves beyond the investigation of individual minds, it also makes a turn to history. Cohen insists on calling his project the “critique of knowledge” precisely to mark its anti-psychologism. But then he further insists that the critique of knowledge has a historical method. Thus, for example, his specific focus in the *Infinitesimal Method* is the concept of an infinitesimal magnitude, a concept he will argue is a necessary condition of the possibility of experience. But when he introduces the infinitesimal concept as his focus, he writes that, “[i]n order to make that logical meaning [of the infinitesimal concept] transparent, it seems useful to deal with this systematic task historically. . . . Cohen 1883: §15).”¹⁹ Here Cohen states as clearly as he ever does that the critique of knowledge must trace the emergence in and development through history of the knowledge it is concerned with. This methodological commitment is borne out in the *Infinitesimal Method* by the fact that the book itself is largely a historical account of the development of the infinitesimal concept (and related concepts of the foundations of calculus). The largely historical plan of the book suggests that Cohen thinks he must work through that history to reveal exactly how the concept of the infinitesimal is a necessary condition of the possibility of experience. That is the method his anti-psychologistic critique of knowledge must have.

However, the strictness of Cohen’s anti-psychologism is expressed most clearly by his distinctive conception of experience.²⁰ It is the conception of experience he defends both in the

¹⁹ See also Cohen 1883: Preface.

²⁰ See Richardson 2003 for a detailed consideration of the significance of Cohen putting the concept of experience at the centre of his critique of knowledge.

first, 1871 edition of his *Kant's Theory of Experience* and in his critique of knowledge of the 1880s. Indeed, Cohen presents his distinctive conception of experience as derived from Kant's conception. However, Cohen's conception of experience differs from Kant's in at least two important respects.

First, Cohen's conception of experience is much narrower than Kant's. Kant's conception of experience seems to include an individual cognitive subject's consciousness of particular events, such as an individual's perceptual awareness of an object undergoing changes in space and time. But for Cohen, "experience" refers exclusively to scientific theories, and paradigmatically, the theories of mathematical natural science.²¹

The second distinctive feature of Cohen's conception of experience is more directly relevant to his anti-psychologism. Cohen does not conceive of science as an activity or process in the mind of an individual knowing subject. Rather, as he puts it in his 1877 *Kant's Foundations of Ethics*, he conceives of the natural science that constitutes experience as if it were laid out "in printed books" (Cohen 1877: 27). In other words, Cohen conceives of science as cognitive content considered independently of the minds of any individual knowers.

The other important locus of Cohen's anti-psychologism is his conception of the epistemic conditions that constitute experience's possibility. When Kant wanted to explain the necessary conditions of experience's possibility (as he conceived of experience), he appealed to transcendental cognitive faculties to provide the necessary explanations. Those transcendental faculties were powers or capacities of the mind to carry out certain cognitive operations. Cohen inherits all of Kant's vocabulary of transcendental cognitive faculties. But he reinterprets it in a manner that is more consonant with his conception of experience as theories of natural science,

²¹ For example, Cohen 1877: 24-5; Cohen 1883: §11; Cohen 1885: 407.

which are themselves conceived as if they were laid out “in printed books.” Thus no later than his *Infinitesimal Method*, Cohen insists that Kant’s talk of cognitive faculties should be understood as “abbreviations” for “methods” of natural science (Cohen 1883: §3).

That is, Cohen takes Kant’s faculty-psychological vocabulary to refer to principles, concepts, and definitions that are contained in (or “latent in” [Cohen 1883: §9])²² natural scientific theories. Thus, for example, in Cohen’s hands “intuition” is no longer the mind’s capacity for singular representation, as it was for Kant. It is the collection of principles and definitions in mathematics that make it possible to specify a unique location in the four-dimensional manifold that constitutes space and time, thereby picking out the identity conditions of an individual.

Cohen calls these principles, concepts, and definitions “the formal conditions of experience” and “constituting conditions of experience” (Cohen 1871: 93ff). Thus, for Cohen, identifying and exhibiting these conditions explains the possibility of experience. His critique of knowledge aims to do precisely that. Since these epistemic conditions are already “latent in” the scientific theories that Cohen identifies with experience, they, no less than that experience, are conceived as if laid out “in printed books.” The validity of experience’s formal conditions is thus independent of the contents that exist in any individual minds.

§5. Continuities between Cohen’s Völkerpsychologie and his critique of knowledge.

We are now in a position to see the continuities between Cohen’s early Völkerpsychologie and his later critique of knowledge.

First, the early Cohen inherits from Lazarus and Steinthal the view that

²² Cf. Cohen 1883: §§33 and 45.

Völkerpsychologie aims to give an account exclusively of higher cultural representations.

Cohen's mature critique of knowledge shares that aim. Cohen's critique of knowledge, like his (and Lazarus and Steinthal's) Völkerpsychologie, is not concerned with lower cognitive achievements. Cohen's critique of knowledge is concerned with experience, which on his distinctive conception means the theories of science, and paradigmatically, the theories of modern mathematical natural science.

Second, Lazarus, Steinthal, and the early Cohen all insist that the methods of individual psychology are inadequate for the task of explaining the higher cultural representations that are their concern. That is a conviction that Cohen affirms in his mature critique of knowledge, where he insists that his account of mathematical natural science cannot be informed by psychology. Further, Lazarus, Steinthal, and the early Cohen all share the conviction that moving beyond the methods of individual psychology requires taking up a historical method. While (as we will see below) history does play a different role in his critique of knowledge than it does in his early Völkerpsychologie, Cohen's critique of knowledge nevertheless affirms the point that rejecting the methods of individual psychology involves embracing a historical method.

However, there is a still more important continuity between Cohen's views during his Völkerpsychologie period and his mature critique of knowledge. Recall that, in his Völkerpsychologie period, Cohen (like Steinthal) regards Völkerpsychologie as only one part of a larger philosophical project. Further, that larger philosophical project is concerned with a "metaphysical validity" that is independent of psychological considerations. In other words, even during the period that Cohen was studying Völkerpsychologie with Steinthal, he maintained an anti-psychologistic conception of the validity higher cultural representations. He carries that anti-psychologism forward into his critique of knowledge.

§6. Differences between Cohen's Völkerpsychologie and his critique of knowledge.

Now we have to consider how Cohen's views change between his early Völkerpsychologie and his mature critique of knowledge. Two of those changes are of fundamental importance. Two others are consequences of them.

Perhaps the most important change is in Cohen's conception of objectivity. In his 1868/69 essay, Cohen conceives of objectivity as existing on a spectrum with the subjectivity of sensory content in individual minds: representations can be more or less objective, and more or less subjective, depending on how distant they are from subjective sensory content. Further, Cohen thinks that no matter how objective representations are, they retain traces of their subjective origins. Thus even representations studied by Völkerpsychologie retain a degree of subjectivity. In contrast with objectivity, metaphysical validity is independent of any all psychological considerations (including völkerpsychological considerations), and so is independent of all subjectivity, even the traces of subjectivity left in the higher cultural representations studied by Völkerpsychologie. But in Cohen's critique of knowledge, he conceives of objectivity in the same way he conceives of validity: entirely independently of any and all psychological considerations.

A second difference follows from the first. In his 1868/69 essay, Cohen takes it that philosophy and Völkerpsychologie have the aim of identifying the traces of subjective representations in objective higher cultural representations. But the idea that philosophy should have that aim depends on Cohen's early view of the formation of objective higher cultural representations, on which their objectivity is determined by their distance from subjective sensory contents in individual minds. But since Cohen's critique of knowledge abandons that

view of objectivity, the aim of identifying subjective traces in objective representations drops out of his project.

A third difference concerns the kind of explanation Cohen aims to give of higher representations and their objectivity. The *Völkerpsychologie* he describes in his 1868/69 essay provides a genetic account of the historical *origins* of higher cultural representations and their objectivity. It begins with a concept such as *god*, and then explains how that concept was formed from, for example, ancient peoples' representations of fire and lightning. In that way, the account of higher cultural representations that *Völkerpsychologie* aims to give is a causal account.

However, Cohen's critique of knowledge has no place for genetic or causal explanation. There, the account of knowledge that Cohen aims to give is not one that identifies the origins of experience (conceived as the theories of natural science). Rather his account identifies the principles that constitute the possibility of that experience, and exhibits those principles in their systematic relations to one another and to other parts of experience. Thus, for example, as Beiser (2015) rightly emphasizes, in Cohen's mature account of knowledge, he no longer uses the term "apperception" in Lazarus and Steinthal's sense of a causal, mechanistic psychological process. He uses it in a Kantian sense that is independent of any causal or genetic processes.

Finally, a fourth difference is a consequence of the third. Cohen's rejection of causal or genetic explanations of experience and its objectivity has consequences for his view of history's role in philosophy. It likewise has consequences for what constitutes the ultimate explanans of his account of experience.

In his 1868/69 essay, *Völkerpsychologie* -- a historical discipline -- provides a genetic, causal account of higher cultural representations and their objectivity. As we have seen, on that account, *Völkerpsychologie* is at least somewhat continuous with individual psychology: that is,

völkerpsychological explanations are extended into individual-psychological explanations. (Recall, the völkerpsychological account of an ancient representation of *god* traces that representation in part to earlier peoples' dealings with lightning, but then individual psychology goes on to explain an individual's representation of lightning.) Consequently, the ultimate explanans of Völkerpsychologie's account of higher cultural representations will include subjective representations and activities in individual minds.

However, given that Cohen's critique of knowledge does not use causal or genetic explanations in its account of experience, Cohen can no longer maintain that *history* provides that genetic explanation. Thus Cohen changes his account of the role that history plays in a philosophical account of experience.

Recall, in Cohen's critique of knowledge, history functions to reveal the epistemic conditions that are latent in experience (conceived as mathematical natural science). Those epistemic conditions are the ultimate explanans of a knowledge-critical account of experience. But they are not a part of the genetic origin of experience, and they are not subjective sensory contents in individual minds. Rather, they are principles, concepts, and methods of natural science, and their objectivity is independent of psychological considerations. Thus while history does reveal the explanans of a knowledge-critical account of experience, that explanans is independent of psychological considerations, and the explanation it provides is not genetic.

An objection can be raised to the interpretation of the role of history in Cohen's critique of knowledge that I have just offered, and I must address that objection, if only briefly.²³ The objection is this. In his critique of knowledge, Cohen attributes to knowledge an objectivity and validity that are timeless, and thus independent of whether or not that knowledge is articulated or

²³ I am grateful to Michael Heidelberger and Katherina Kinzel for pressing me to consider this objection.

affirmed in any particular period of history. But then, it seems there is nothing to learn about that objectivity or validity from how knowledge develops in history. Consequently, Cohen cannot take a historical view of knowledge in his critique of knowledge.

Cohen's view resolves this tension. Here, however, I can offer only the briefest sketch of how it does so.²⁴ For Cohen, the epistemic conditions that constitute experience's possibility are unlike the higher cultural representations studied by *Völkerpsychologie*: the content of epistemic conditions is not determined by changing historical processes. On the contrary, they are timelessly valid, and the history of mathematical natural science is developing towards the complete articulation of them.²⁵ However, the expressions of those epistemic conditions at particular periods in history are changeable, limited, and incomplete. But despite the limitations of the epistemic conditions expressed at different periods in history, the content of those epistemic conditions is still *revealed* to philosophy most reliably (or only) by historical investigation. Thus philosophy must attend to history in order to discover the content of epistemic conditions that are timelessly valid.²⁶

§7. *From Herbart to Kant.*

Time to take stock. Remember the view we started with, suggested by Sieg (2004) and

²⁴ A complete account of Cohen's view of the function of history for philosophy would have to show the way his view was shaped by several of his teachers, and not just Steinthal, but in this case also Trendelenburg and, perhaps most importantly, his rabbinical school professors, including his history professor Heinrich Graetz and Zacharias Frankel.

²⁵ This latter commitment of Cohen's is expressed most clearly in his mature doctrine of Kant's thing in itself. See, for example, Cohen 1885: 665 and 707.

²⁶ See, for example, Cohen 1883: Preface and §15.

others. On that view, Cohen had a thoroughly psychologistic approach to questions about knowledge and representation until he underwent a rapid and radical conversion to anti-psychologism sometime in 1870 or 1871. That rapid philosophical about-face is a “riddle” (Sieg 2004: 461) that demands explanation.

We can now see a very different picture of Cohen’s transition to his mature anti-psychologism. First, there are striking continuities between his *Völkerpsychologie* and his anti-psychologistic critique of knowledge. Years before Cohen began to develop his mature views, his time spent with Steinthal training in *Völkerpsychologie* had already committed him to key features of his mature anti-psychologistic critique of knowledge. In particular, he already took higher cultural representations to be the exclusive concern of his investigation, and he was already committed to the view that investigating higher cultural representations requires moving beyond the methods of individual psychology and instead embracing a historical perspective on knowledge.

Further, even as Cohen was writing in *Völkerpsychologie*, he was already committed to a conception of the validity of representations that is *anti-psychologistic* -- what in that period he called “metaphysical validity.” But given this feature of Cohen’s early views, there is no need to look for an explanation of his rapid conversion to anti-psychologism, because there *was* no such conversion. He always had an anti-psychologistic account of validity.

In fact, it possible to go farther than just noting continuities between Cohen’s early *Völkerpsychologie* and his anti-psychologistic critique of knowledge. Cohen’s time spent studying *Völkerpsychologie* with Steinthal was actually a positive influence on at least some elements of his critique of knowledge. To be sure, this point should not be overstated: *Völkerpsychologie* was not the only important influence on Cohen on the points in question. But

it was part of the proximate intellectual context that shaped his mature views.

For example, Cohen's teacher Adolf Trendelenburg was a source of Cohen's mature view that the locus of philosophical theorizing about knowledge should be knowledge's higher, most developed form, namely, science.²⁷ But Steinthal also taught Cohen to take that kind of higher representation as his exclusive concern. Likewise, Trendelenburg and, even more so, scholars associated with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement -- some of whom founded and taught at the rabbinical school Cohen studied at before studying philosophy -- instilled in Cohen a commitment to taking a historical view of knowledge's development.²⁸ But that commitment to a historical perspective came no less from Steinthal and Cohen's time studying *Völkerpsychologie* with him.

My aim here is not to give a complete account of these influences on Cohen, but only to show that *Völkerpsychologie* was among them. Still, even that conclusion seems almost paradoxical: a discipline whose practitioners conceived of it as a kind of psychology was a positive influence on at least some elements of Cohen's mature, anti-psychologicist critique of knowledge.

On the other hand, we are now in position to see exactly how Cohen's mature critique of knowledge differs from his earlier *völkerpsychological* views, and thus exactly what transition in his thinking needs to be explained.

Cohen abandons his early conception of objectivity, on which it is continuous with, and

²⁷ See, for example, Trendelenburg 1862: I.130ff.

²⁸ The *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement was influenced by critical philological and historical methods in German universities (such as the Tübingen school), and the movement's members sought to use those same critical methods in the study of Jewish history and religion. Thus, for example, members of the movement such as Zacharias Frankel, Abraham Geiger, and Heinrich Graetz held that the essence of Judaism had to be studied historically.

contains traces of, subjective sensory contents from individual minds. Likewise, he abandons the attempt to explain that objectivity with a causal, genetic account of how it develops out of subjective sensory contents in individual minds. In the place of these views, Cohen adopts a conception of objectivity on which it is conceived like validity -- that is, independently of psychological considerations. The critique of knowledge seeks to explain knowledge's objectivity by appeal to the formal conditions of the possibility of experience, which are themselves conceived as having a validity that is independent of the contents of individual minds.

At the same time, Cohen also abandons "deductive critique," the Herbartian anti-psychologistic project of resolving tensions in concepts that undermine those concepts' validity. In that project's place, he adopts a different anti-psychologistic project, namely, the critique of knowledge, which seeks to to explain knowledge's validity by appeal to the formal conditions of the possibility of experience.

This transition in Cohen's early thinking is thus not a rapid conversion to anti-psychologism. It is the transition from a broadly Herbartian, two-sided project that seeks both a psychologistic account of objectivity and an anti-psychologistic account of metaphysical validity, to a Kantian project that gives anti-psychologistic accounts of both objectivity and validity, by appeal to the formal conditions of the possibility of experience.

From this perspective, what needs to be explained is why Cohen became dissatisfied with treating objectivity psychologistically and differently than validity, such that the first admits of causal, genetic explanation but the second does not. That is the question that needs to be answered for us to understand Cohen's place at the head of the anti-psychologistic neo-Kantian tradition. Thus that is the question that needs to be answered for us to understand Cohen's role in

shaping the anti-psychologism that dominated late nineteenth-century German philosophy.

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