The problem of disenchantment: scientific naturalism and esoteric discourse, 1900-1939
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Conclusion:

Disenchantment and Problemgeschichte

The main argument of this book has been that the disenchantment thesis associated with the work of Max Weber must be reconceptualised; the evocative term of “Entzauberung” is better used to refer to an intellectual problem than to a socio-historical process. The problem of disenchantment in Western knowledge cultures thus provides an analytical framework for studying the complex and sometimes surprising relations between discourses concerned with the possibilities and limitations of knowledge – whether esoteric, philosophical, scientific, or religious. It provides an alternative to process-oriented narratives of the development of “Western culture”, “Western science”, and “Western philosophy”, emphasising the conflicting responses of individual historical actors rather than the idea of an unstoppable march of abstract “processes”. Focusing on the plurality of competing intellectual identities, and claims about the reach of knowledge, the problem of disenchantment offers a useful tool for those disciplines in which the disenchantment thesis has most often been invoked – particularly the history of religion and the history of science, but ultimately the history of knowledge more broadly. Moreover, adopting this approach means pursuing historical research along the methodological lines of Problemgeschichte. ¹ On these final pages we shall have a closer look at the implications of this approach, while refreshing our memories of key points raised in the twelve chapters of this book.

¹ In adopting Problemgeschichte I am inspired by Kocku von Stuckrad’s recent suggestion that this approach become the foundation for the academic study of esotericism. In his words: ‘The study of esoteric discourses in European history of religion generates a field of research along the lines of Problemgeschichte (“history of problems”). The problems addressed by the academic study of esotericism relate to basic aspects of Western self-understanding: how do we explain the rhetoric’s of rationality, science, Enlightenment, progress, and absolute truth in their relation to religious claims? How do we elucidate the conflicting pluralities of religious worldviews, identities, and forms of knowledge that lie at the bottom of Western culture?’ As the reader will have noticed, the questions asked in the present work are very much on the same line, but they find their theoretical grounding in a broader “problem of disenchantment” rathet than in “esoteric discourse” as such. Von Stuckrad, Locations of Knowledge, 64.
One notable implication of the approach I have advanced is that the concept of disenchantment is brought into closer agreement with Weber's general methodological project, as will be seen. But reserving the use of disenchantment as a concept exclusively for a problem-oriented rather than a process-oriented historiography also has consequences for the way we approach the history of knowledge in general. Therefore, the first thing we must do is to have a closer look at what *Problemgeschichte* is all about and to what it stands opposed. When applied to disenchantment, the problem historical approach lets us construe a field of research in the history of knowledge. The contours of the field have been drawn throughout this book, but I will highlight the main points again here for the sake of clarity. Two additional questions emerge from this summary, which must be dealt with separately towards the end of this conclusion. The first of these has to do with explaining consistencies in the field that has been uncovered: how can we explain, from a historical perspective, that a number of otherwise disparate fields of culture are found to display important structural similarities? The answer will be sought in the origin of the problem of disenchantment, located in a handful of important developments in theology, philosophy of religion, and early Enlightenment historiography. The second question concerns the role of processes in problem history: does *Problemgeschichte* repudiate all references to processes, or do they still have a relevant role to play? I shall argue that the adoption of *Problemgeschichte* does not mean that all talk of process is meaningless, misleading, or wrong. It does, however, put strict methodological constraints on the conceptualisation, scope, and use of processes. At the very end of these conclusions I shall address a final dilemma that looms before the problem historian: how do we reconcile the claim that the formulation of scientific methodologies has been intertwined with ultimately “political” concerns about scientific identities with the fact that *Problemgeschichte* itself takes a very clear stance on methodology? Can the problem historian avoid taking part in the very same debates about the identity of the academic project that he has set out to analyse?

These final reflections will hopefully make it easier for the reader to place the totality of the present work, with its overarching argument and many constituent parts, in its proper scholarly context. I also hope to convince the reader that two main things have been achieved. On the level of methodology, I have suggested a solid framework suitable for a genuinely interdisciplinary history of knowledge. And, by applying this
framework throughout, I hope to have given fresh insights into significant conceptual relations between the scientific, religious, and esoteric discourse of a period that was crucial to the shaping of late modernity.

**DOING WEBER ONE BETTER:**

**DISENCHANTMENT AND THE METHODOLOGY OF PROBLEM HISTORY**

By embedding the concept of disenchantment in the broader methodology of *Problemgeschichte*, we can make Weber’s original thesis more consistent with his own overall programme. Ironically, perhaps, one of the clearest formulations of what problem history really entails is found in a paper published in 1904 by none other than Max Weber himself. In this article, which focused on the methodology of the social sciences, Weber wrote that ‘[it is] not the “factual” relationship of “things”, but the *conceptual* relationships of *problems* [that] underlie the research fields of the sciences’.²

This pregnant sentence contains a clue to understanding how problem history differs from other ways of doing historical research. As Otto Gerhard Oexle has shown, *Problemgeschichte* as formulated by Weber and some of his contemporaries stands as an alternative to four different approaches to history.³ Firstly, it opposes the naïve view of historical research as “mere descriptions” and accumulation of “facts”.⁴ Secondly, it stands in opposition to the related Rankian position of historical realism, by which the historian’s business is to uncover “what really happened”. Thirdly, it strives to avoid the radically relativistic alternative, summed up in Nietzsche’s aphorism ‘facta ficta’, that history is “merely” a form of fiction: there are indeed historical “truths” to be found, but these are dependent on the ‘intellectual relation of problems’ rather than on the ‘factual


³ Important names here are the neo-Kantian philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Heinrich Richert, and contemporary German sociologists, most notably Karl Mannheim, Georg Simmel, and Ernst Troeltsch. See Oexle, ‘Max Weber – Geschichte als Problemgeschichte’; Michael Hänel, ‘Problemgeschichte als Forschung’; Reinhard Laube, ‘Perspektivität’.

relation of things'. Finally, *Problemgeschichte* in Weber’s variety was intended to answer the challenge posed to the humanities by the natural sciences in a novel way: it rejected both the “scientistic” notion that the discipline of history must become an explanatory natural science in its own right, and the hermeneutic alternatives of Dilthey and others, in which the humanities were held to be radically different from the sciences as they were aiming at “understanding” (*Verstehen*) rather than “explanation” (*Erklärung*). 5

Weber’s methodological alternative to these positions was firmly grounded in neo-Kantianism: the humanities and social sciences must find their particular objectivity through reflection on the limitations of empirical knowledge in their particular fields. 6 Weber’s contribution to *Problemgeschichte* thus lies in applying the essentially Kantian emphasis on the role of the active, knowing subject to the context of historical research. Just as any knowing subject sees reality filtered through the categories of understanding, the historian cannot avoid actively structuring, ordering, and selecting the materials that make up historical reality. The possibilities for history to appear have thus already been limited before any actual investigation of it is undertaken. It is in this sense that no “pure facts” of history exist; but this does not mean that nothing can be known, that all claims to objectivity are bankrupt, or that we need to embrace some form of subjective emotionalism on the basis of a methodological “Einfühlung”. Instead, by reflecting on the categories and limitations of our understanding, we may proceed to formulate intellectual problems that may, in a self-conscious and methodical manner, be used by the researcher to order, structure, and analyse empirical material. These are the “transcendental” (in the Kantian sense) conditions in which historical research finds itself.

Weber followed these methodological principles with great success in most of his work. Weber’s formulation and use of “ideal types” made it possible to construct areas of research based on analytically interesting conceptual relations, such as various forms of authority (“charismatic”, “traditional”, “rational-legalistic”) or different forms of community-building (e.g. “Gesellschaft” and “Gemeinschaft”). 7 The famous thesis on the Protestant ethic and the emergence of the capitalist system of production may serve as an excellent example of this methodology’s application: the ideal-typical construct of

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5 Ibid., 16-17.
6 Ibid., 17-18.
“inner-worldly asceticism” made it possible to connect the Calvinist ethic with the emergence of capitalism and thus establish conceptual links between areas of culture that lacked any obvious and direct factual connection.\(^8\)

It has, nevertheless, been said that Weber was his own most formidable opponent: he was not always consistent in applying the principles he designed and advised for the scientific study of history and society.\(^9\) The concept of disenchantment is a case in point. It was never systematically aligned with Weber’s overall methodology, but was instead portrayed, more or less implicitly and without sufficient theorisation, as an unavoidable effect of the social processes of intellectualisation and rationalisation. This theoretically less sophisticated position has been adopted by Weber’s later interpreters, the effect being that the “disenchantment thesis” has taken on a curiously un-Weberian shape. Correcting undertheorised views of the “disenchantment process” and reinstating the perspective of the problem historian has thus been the main agenda of the present work.

Referring to my discussion in the first two chapters of this book, we may identify three interconnected notions about disenchantment that must be discarded if we are to make the concept compatible with Problemgeschichte. These may be listed as follows:

1) **realism**; the view that disenchantment refers to an objectively real process that can be traced and described, based on a generalisation from historical “facts”;

2) **progressivism/degenerationism**; the view that this process represents a progressive pattern in Western culture, away from irrationalism and superstition towards science, technology, and a rational order of society; or conversely, but by the same logic, that it constitutes a degenerative development by which the West drifts away from a noble, primitive past;

3) **disenchantment as explanation**; the notion that the process can be invoked to explain historical events, cultural developments, or individual utterances and actions.

These three notions belong together: the second and third point both rely on realism, and progress and degeneration are often invoked as explanations. Together, these

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notions have had a number of negative effects on scholarship, as demonstrated in the opening chapters of this book. Above all, realistic narratives of the disenchantment process, whether of a progressivist or a degenerationist bent, have led to serious blind spots by which intriguing segments of present and past intellectual culture are kept hidden from view. They paint a monolithic picture of Western intellectual history, and tend to portray the roles played by “scientific” and “academic” cultures in ways that are much too simplistic. Progressivist narratives are, for example, typically a little too confident about the straightforward march of reason and the stable, “rational” identity of the scientific establishment. Even more problematic are the degenerationist counter-narratives that invert these stereotypes, creating demonised views of “materialistic science” crouched in a highly moralistic and politicised discourse. When such stereotypes are universalised and invoked as explanations, things really go wrong. Thus, in the “re-enchantment paradigm” discussed in chapter two, a disenchanted scientific mentality/ideology is thought to explain anything deemed wrong with contemporary society. A formidable causal power is thus ascribed to the presumed ideology of modern science, apparently capable of indoctrinating entire generations and acting as a primary cause of anything from environmental destruction, and world war, to mass-medication, consumerism, and the general “immorality” of modern society. Simplistic in the extreme, such “explanations” in terms of disenchantment are obviously untenable from a historical point of view.

Narratives of progress and degeneration are both incompatible with the problem-historian’s approach to disenchantment. Apart from the ideological biases underlying such perspectives, the problem is that there cannot be any data for such processes if we take the methodology of Problemgeschichte seriously. As Oexle states regarding this methodology in general:

the fundamental difference between a narrative history and a “problem-history” consists in that the latter does not depict its object, but constructs it. The problem-historian knows that

10 For an example of moral entrepreneurship along these lines, see Morris Berman, The Reenchantment of the World, 17. Cf. my discussion in chapter two.
his materials are not the “facts”, but rather that his knowledge is based on a conceptualisation of the objects of his research. 11

Disenchantment cannot refer to a “real” process capable of being described by the accumulation and systematisation of independent “facts”, simply because no such pristine facts exist, lying ready to be discovered: narratives of progress or degeneration can only be substantiated by actively establishing connections between disparate sources that are already pre-selected by the knowing subject and by the structural limitations imposed by its environment. The problem historian must recognise that even the best substantiated and convincing historical “process” is perceived by actively superimposing pattern on the material. The analogy to Kantian epistemology should be clear: the historian is no less dependent on the transcendental categories of understanding than any other observer. 12 However this may be, an even more important point follows from the problem-historian’s reconceptualisation of disenchantment: the term can never perform any explanatory function. As a problem formulated by the scholar for the sake of analysis – standing between the historian and “history” in a way that is analogous to how categories stand in between the observer and “reality” according to Kant – disenchantment can only help us build knowledge about conceptual relations that we first recognise and formulate through reflection, and then encounter in an active engagement with a vast material of sources. The concept itself cannot explain the origin of the sources that they analyse.

The focus on explanation brings us to another way in which the approach developed in this book brings disenchantment into closer agreement with Weber’s overall project: our approach must follow the principles of a methodological


12 With this I merely want to make a suggestive comparison, avoiding entering into a technical discussion of the applicability of Kantian categories to the historian’s encounter with her empirical material. This would clearly require at least another book. For a condensed discussion of Kantian categories, see Amie Thomasson, ‘Categories’; Derk Pereboom, ‘Kant’s Transcendental Arguments’.
individualism. We cannot explain a certain historical actor’s intellectual production – say, T. H. Huxley’s paper ‘On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata’ – by referring to the lawful unfolding of a disenchantment process. Instead, the rationale behind the production of works belonging to what we, for analytical purposes, have chosen to call a “disenchanted” discourse must be sought in the particular motivations, concerns, and agendas of specific historical actors. Explanation must go from particularities to generalities, not from generalities to particularities. The actions and choices of individuals explain the creation of a discourse of disenchantment, not the other way around. It goes without saying that the individual always remains embedded in discourse, and must always draw upon resources that are already present in his or her surrounding society; but the point remains that these surroundings do not sufficiently explain the choices and actions of the individual actor. Together, these two methodological points – problem history and methodological individualism – provide an approach to disenchantment that has enabled us to take a fresh look at relations between science, religion, and esotericism in the early 20th century.

**THE CONTOURS OF A CONCEPTUAL FIELD**

What new ‘conceptual relationships between problems’ have come to light by reconceptualising disenchantment along the lines of Problemgeschichte? Above all, the problem of disenchantment has enabled us to explore how a broad range of historical actors have dealt with fundamental questions concerning the relation between facts and values, where we are to draw the outer boundaries of what can be known, and how we can relate scientific knowledge to concerns of religion and worldview. These questions span epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, and soteriology. By analysing responses to such questions, formulated in a specific historical period, we have been able to trace a network of relations between discourses that otherwise tend to be kept apart. We have, for example, uncovered conceptual affinities between physics and occultism at the fin de siècle, between scientific biology and psychical research, and between methodological challenges in psychology and the practice of ritual magic. Equally important, however,

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13 See my discussion of this principle in chapter one. For the relation to Weber’s own work, see Joseph Schumpeter, ‘On the Concept of Social Value’; for a concise formulation of the principle, see Jon Elster, ‘The Case for Methodological Individualism’.
are the conceptual disjunctions we have seen inside established scientific discourses: mechanists versus organicists in biology, behaviourists versus purposive psychologists, and differing positions on questions regarding causality, continuity, and scientific realism in physics. Together, these affinities and disjunctions destabilise dichotomies that otherwise appear intuitive and taken-for-granted, such as between an academic establishment and an “occult” underground, between scientific professionals and pseudoscientific amateurs, and ultimately between “accepted” and “rejected” forms of knowledge.

One particularly significant implication of this book’s argument is that the identity of “the Western academy” has never been decisively settled, but always remains open for negotiation. The establishment is itself pluralistic, permitting a number of diverging and conflicting responses to the problem of disenchantment within its confines. To bring this crucial point into focus once more, we might recall some of the findings of previous chapters. Consider, for example, the natural sciences, where the problem of disenchantment was accentuated precisely in struggles to construct new scientific identities to replace older ones. In the case of physics, a young generation of ambitious and brilliant scientists cast themselves in the role of revolutionaries and proceeded to build an identity contrasted with earlier generations. These new identities rested not only on a perceived break with previous research traditions, but also on an active engagement with broader cultural impulses. The most notable case was German physics after the Great War. The rise of a pessimistic cultural atmosphere that was highly sceptical of what it considered “mechanistic”, “materialistic” and “reductionist” sciences made it desirable to brand physics as a form of “culture” and “philosophy of life”. Meanwhile, it now appeared wise to avoid the utilitarian discourse that had earlier been so important for branding the discipline to financiers and government officials.\textsuperscript{14}

I have identified the construction of scientific identity in this period (roughly the 1920s) as the origin of a highly influential “emic historiography of science”. In this constructed memory of scientific development, designed to provide an identity that was easier to market in a culture suspicious of “modernity”, 19\textsuperscript{th}-century Victorian science was cast as the prototype of a thoroughly “disenchanted” science. Those who invented

\textsuperscript{14} The full argument was spelled out in chapter four.
this narrative could no doubt build on some of the public writings of the Victorian naturalists in order to do this. However, they also had to gloss over the strong idealist impulse in 19th century physics, as well as the continued presence of natural theology below the surface of the “official” doctrines of scientific naturalism propounded, as it was, by a rather limited number of scientific professionals. The result has been the creation of simplistic narratives of modern science, which have become broadly popularised and used to serve a number of different purposes. The notion of a “new scientific revolution” connected with the development of quantum mechanics, with deep implications for worldview, religion, and spirituality, is particularly notable in this respect. The view that a “disenchanted classical science” has given way to a “re-enchanted modern science”, rife with mysteries such as complementarity, wave-particle duality, and acausality, has been perpetually reproduced by pop science journalism, “alternative” religious discourses, and humanities scholars with a superficial knowledge of the history of science. However inaccurate it may be as historiography, it is crucial to note that this myth has its origin among physicists seeking an alternative identity for their profession. It means that the “emic historiography of science” is part of the plurality of academic discourse – not merely a result of non-scientific discourses (e.g. religious, philosophical, esoteric) trying to claim legitimacy by rhetorical appeals to science. While the latter is certainly also a part of the story, it is significant that non-scientific actors could easily appropriate a framework that had already been produced by scientists.

Physics was not the only discipline in which new identities were constructed along the lines of diverging responses to the problem of disenchantment. Similar dichotomies emerged within biology and psychology as well, as discussed at length in chapter five. The very ambition of defining “life” and “mind” proved to be intimately connected with the problem of disenchantment, and entire research traditions can be

15 Cf. Ruth Barton, “Huxley, Lubbock, and Half a Dozen Others”. The dynamic between the Victorian construction of scientific identity, and the early 20th century inversion of it, see especially chapters two and four.
16 See e.g. my discussion at the beginning of chapter four.
17 Recall my discussion of “quantum mysticism” in chapter six.
18 For the rhetorical uses of science by esoteric spokespersons, see Olav Hammer, Claiming Knowledge, 201-330. For the relation between scholarly creations and popular uses of “tradition”, see Asprem and Granholm, ‘Constructing Esotericisms’, 36-45.
distinguished by the ways in which they answered it. The main question, of course, was whether or not the phenomena of life and mind were capable of being described completely in terms of mechanistic processes that were structurally indistinguishable from those studied by “classical physics”. If so, it would mean that life and thought, as the final refuges of the non-mechanical and unpredictable, had also been disenchanted. Individuality, meaning, and free will would then have been reduced to little else than inconsequential epiphenomena of a perfectly predictable clockwork. If a mechanical explanation of life could not be found, however, one would have ascribed to living organisms an irreducible autonomy that essentially contradicted the “disenchanted world”, introducing a mysterious factor that would, furthermore, make it impossible to understand and predict the complex workings of the world completely.

These were not matters of purely philosophical relevance; they were full of implications for the identity of biology and psychology as disciplines. If life and mind could be reduced entirely to material and mechanistic processes, then it would be easy to argue that biology and psychology must ultimately be framed as complex subfields of physics rather than independent disciplines in their own right. Some authors, such as Jacques Loeb in biology, and John Watson in psychology, indeed adopted this view, and set out to build strong mechanistic programmes in their respective disciplines. Others, such as Hans Driesch, William McDougall, and Conwy Lloyd Morgan, fought what they saw as illegitimate annexations of their disciplines, or as imprudent manifestations of “physics envy”. A basic fault line thus erupted between mechanistic and non-mechanistic approaches, with neo-vitalists, Lamarckians, organicists and holists comprising a non-mechanistic wing that has often been neglected by progressivist accounts of the modern history of these sciences. When we place the life and mind sciences in the framework of the problem of disenchantment, we are able to uncover the conceptual relations linking the behaviourism debate in psychology and the vitalism controversy in biology. Moreover, we have found that these were linked to similar controversies surrounding the interpretations of quantum mechanics in physics, and to concerns in less scientifically reputable fields, most notably parapsychology. The problem of disenchantment thus provides a new conceptual map that enables us to trace the movements of historical actors who explicitly made connections between these diverse fields.
The case of parapsychology and psychical research, extensively discussed in chapters seven, eight, and nine, is crucial to understanding the role of the problem of disenchantment in modern intellectual culture. I have used the epithet “laboratories of enchantment” to describe parapsychological research programmes, and I think it points to some important characteristics of the field as a whole. We may illustrate them by recalling the main points of each of the three chapters on psychical research and parapsychology. First of all, we saw in chapter seven that psychical research arose from an epistemological discourse of “anti-agnosticism”. This position was predicated on extending reason and scientific method to phenomena that were considered genuinely “enchanted”, in the technical sense of appearing to be incalculable and mysterious events, and lacking an explanation within “normal” theoretical frameworks. Secondly, in chapter eight I documented how the field strove to overcome a plethora of methodological difficulties in its quest for a proper research paradigm for studying such phenomena. I argued that laboratories of enchantment were ultimately faced with the dilemma of quantifying the unique. Reproducible quantitative data were required by the increasingly sophisticated scientific methods of neighbouring fields such as biology and psychology. The result when applied to parapsychology was, however, that the supposedly enchanted phenomena drowned in a statistical average. As it turned out, the controversies that arose from this dilemma would contribute directly to the development of new statistical methods as well as innovative ways of controlling experiments on human subjects. Thirdly, the main argument of chapter nine was that parapsychology managed to achieve professional status within a university setting in the 1930s precisely by mobilising “enchanted” theoretical alternatives from across the spectrum of the biological, psychological, and physical sciences.

This third point is important, as it once again highlights the plurality of academic identities: it was possible to build and legitimise a new university discipline by emphasising “enchantment” and positioning it against theoretical trends tending towards “disenchantment”. As was the case with the construction of new disciplinary identity in Weimar era physics, the professionalisation of parapsychology also illustrates the interplay with highly contingent contextual factors. We cannot fully explain the success of parapsychology’s professionalisation campaign without acknowledging that the anti-disenchantment discourses it mobilised had particular force in the immediate cultural context in which professionalisation took place. Thus it
is not a coincidence that it was a newly founded university in the southern region of the United States (Duke, North Carolina) that came to be the first host of a complete parapsychology programme. The cultural disjunction between the northern and southern American states came to mirror the disenchantment/enchantment distinction itself: thus, parapsychology’s disciplinary identity could easily accommodate a southern, “enchanted” profile, pitted against what was seen as a “disenchanted”, northern “establishment”. It promised not only to fight the rising tide of “northern” behaviourism, but also to establish a scientific line of defence for religion and conservative cultural values, appealing to Duke University’s explicit goal of becoming an institution for ‘conservative progress’.19 The interplay between theoretical emphasis and cultural values in the construction of disciplinary identity is similar to the one identified for German physics after the Great War, where science was to be reconceptualised as “culture”. In all of the cases we have considered – whether in physics, biology, or parapsychology – the problem of disenchantment emphasises the conceptual relationships utilised by historical actors in order to forge identities, extending from the scientific “hard core” of disciplines, to the philosophical, political, and cultural contexts in which they are embedded.

Problems similar to the ones encountered by psychical researchers were identified in esoteric discourses of the early 20th century. In chapter ten I argued that, following the Enlightenment and the growth of the natural sciences, esoteric discourse typically aligned itself with the epistemological attitude of an open-ended naturalism. While it is sometimes asserted that modern esoteric spokespersons have been able to withdraw their doctrines and practices from possible conflicts with science and rationality by relegating them to the purely psychological sphere of the imagination, I argued that occultists and spiritualists have typically been doing something quite the opposite. Whether intentionally or not, their desire to partake in the prestige of the scientific project actually led them to an open confrontation with science. As in the case of psychical research, open-ended naturalism not only promised the possibility of seeking scientific legitimacy; it also implied a commitment to adjust one’s beliefs according to the evidence. They were ultimately forced to meet with disconfirmation and falsification in the form of alternative hypotheses and new evidence. This, I have

argued, is a direct consequence of modern esotericists' common refusal to undergo the intellectual sacrifice. Precisely because esoteric spokespersons refused to play by the rules of a disenchanted world, preferring to avoid a strict separation of the spheres of religion and science, or empirical knowledge and absolute truths, serious tensions with empirical science remained a very real possibility. In chapter eleven I demonstrated how these inherent tensions were actualised in the context of Theosophy’s engagement with science. There were two aspects to this tension. First, there is the possibility of empirical disconfirmation of specific factual claims made on the basis of occult practices such as clairvoyance. This was an inevitable problem for Theosophy’s occult chemistry, which aimed to make contributions to scientific chemistry by clairvoyantly scrying the elements. Secondly, I pointed to an inherent tension between Theosophy’s claims to perennial higher truth and the historical reality of scientific change. The ironic outcome was that the “wisdom of all ages” now appears suspiciously similar to the science of the 1880s.

Just as the other discourses we have examined, modern esotericism is characterised by a complexity of responses to the problem of disenchantment. Thus, in the last chapter of this book we saw how a comparison of two influential systems of esoteric epistemology from the early 20th century provided a unique insight into the range of epistemological possibilities available to modern esoteric spokespersons. The comparison of Rudolf Steiner and Aleister Crowley revealed first of all a radically different attitude to the acquisition of knowledge: Steiner emphasised a path of reverence and devotion, while Crowley stressed the importance of scepticism and rational criticism. Moreover, Steiner saw a sceptical attitude as directly detrimental to acquiring higher knowledge (equating it with “materialistic” science), while Crowley saw reverence as a first step to delusion and self-deception. The approaches could not have been more different. In our context, however, the most important point to make is that the perspectives of both Crowley and Steiner reflected their intellectual contexts. The difference between esoteric epistemologies is constructed along fundamental fault lines originating in academic culture. Steiner was a trained academic philosopher, and his Geheimwissenschaft reflected intellectual discourses prominent in Germany, especially post-Kantian German idealism and a growing emphasis on the methodological separation between the humanities and the natural sciences. Crowley, for his part, reflected the epistemology of British scientific naturalism, emphasising the
universality of scientific method, counterbalanced with influences from Anglo-American pragmatism. The comparison suggests that the plurality of the academy manifests itself also in the sphere of the occult.

This is not to say that general trends and patterns between the two are absent. As I argued throughout the final chapters, esoteric epistemologies appear to be based primarily on an approach to knowledge that may be identified – through a modification of the reason-faith-gnosis typology – as “unbounded reason”. This is the effect of dismissing the intellectual sacrifice and extending epistemological optimism to all spheres of reality. Cosmology, theology, metaphysics – nothing is outside the grasp of human understanding according to this view. There are no limits to knowledge. Moreover, and contrary to absolutist knowledge claims typical of certain theological systems, knowledge can be gained entirely by the seeker’s own initiative, through the use of special techniques or the cultivation and training of occult perceptual faculties inherent to human nature. The difference we have noted between Crowley and Steiner concerns the specifics of how such special techniques and faculties actually work; the fundamental assumption that higher knowledge can be achieved by those who seek it remains the same. Moreover, these esoteric knowledge claims diverge in a crucial way from the category of “gnosis”, understood as purely experiential and non-discursive forms of knowledge. Appeals to unbounded reason importantly remain within an evidential discourse, leading to some very significant consequences that claims to gnosis simply lack. The evidential discourse of unbounded reason may have been appealing or even mandatory for those seeking scientific legitimacy, but it also became the source of serious friction between esoteric and scientific discourses, as we have just discussed. Appeals to pure gnosis would, perhaps, have been able to avoid the looming possibility of confrontation with disconfirming evidence. Something like this can be found in esoteric and new religious discourses of the post-war era, emphasising an increased turn to the self and an individualistic epistemology which only claims “what is true for me”. Esoteric spokespersons of the 19th and early 20th century, however, appear to have been much too hungry for scientific legitimacy and universality to pursue an individualised “gnostic” strategy consistently.

20 See e.g. Hammer, Claiming Knowledge, 415-454.
NATURAL THEOLOGY AND THE ORIGIN OF THE PROBLEM OF DISENCHANTMENT

The unbinding of reason, far from being a feature of esoteric discourses alone, connects currents in all of the three fields that we have discussed in this book. The extension of the realm of fact and evidence beyond the boundaries imposed on it by theological and philosophical authorities of the Reformation and Enlightenment periods constitutes the promethean ambition of the psychical researcher and the esoteric visionary, but also of many of the scientists, philosophers and scholars that we have encountered throughout this book. Above all, the modern Prometheus rises in the field of natural theology: the fusion of theology, metaphysics, and modern science that we discussed in chapter six rejected the intellectual sacrifice as emphatically as the parapsychologist and the occultist. This also means that while Lord Gifford designed his lecture series in natural theology to avoid theological censorship, by disallowing any “religious tests”, the whole project was still heavily biased. It was biased in favour of positions that earlier would have been considered heretical: it dismissed the infallibility of revelation, while it deemed the dispassionate study of nature to be a legitimate source of knowledge about the divine. As I argued in chapter six, this view rests on theological assumptions that, intriguingly, offer another connection with esoteric discourse: panentheism. The theological substratum that appears to support both natural theology and esoteric epistemologies is also the key to understanding why we see similar responses to the problem of disenchantment in this wide range of discourses. Understanding the connection between the problem of disenchantment and the theological underpinnings of the new natural theologies may also give us fresh insights into the development of Western knowledge cultures after the Enlightenment. So let us now be more ambitious, and move from describing relations between discourses to offer a tentative explanation of the relations that we have uncovered.

Doing so demands addressing a basic question: where does the problem of disenchantment come from? If we follow the logic of Weber’s original argument, we might be tempted to say that it is connected to the sociological processes of “rationalisation” and “intellectualisation”. The origin of a disenchanted mentality is found in the establishment of bureaucratic forms of governance, legal structures that appeal to rational principles rather than divine or magical sources of authority (i.e. “charisma” and “tradition”), and in the technologisation of production, business,
transportation, and so forth. In this strict sociological sense, “disenchantment” takes
the role of an ideological superstructure (pretty much in a Marxian sense) to changes in
the infrastructure of society of a relatively recent origin, connected with the rise of
capitalism, industrialisation, and the modern nation state. However, that is not the end
of the story; Weber’s own methodological orientation was committed to explaining
infrastructural changes by referring to the motivations and behavioural dispositions of
individual actors. Thus, intellectualisation and rationalisation, giving rise ultimately to
“disenchantment”, were not merely superstructural effect of infrastructural changes,
but first came about as theological developments. Capitalism itself was but a material
and institutional manifestation of an ethos born out of the universalised askesis of
Protestantism. For Weber, disenchantment was, as we saw in the first chapters of this
book, ultimately tied to theological questions concerning the transcendence of the
divine. It was concerned with the relation between creator and creation, with the
autonomy of nature, and the question of whether or not spiritual, supernatural powers
were active in the world.

This theological background remains important even when we conceptualise
disenchantment as a problem. It would, then, be possible in theory to apply the
construct to all monotheistic theological systems where the immanence of divine and
supernatural powers are bound to become a theoretical concern. From a historical point
of view, anti-“pagan” polemical discourses of antiquity would be of interest to such an
analysis, as would attempts to reconcile and legitimise the practice of “magic” with
orthodox monotheism. Viewed in this light, the early church’s problem with “images”
foreshadowed the mechanist’s problem with vital forces. The full crystallisation of the
problem of disenchantment only took place in a much later period, one might say

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21 As seen in chapter one, this was the logic of Weber’s argument in 1913. See Weber, ‘Categories of
Interpretive Sociology’.

22 These polemical discourses are in fact fundamental for how “magic” has been conceptualised in the first
place. See especially Randall Styers, Making Magic; Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy, 164-177.

23 For a theorisation of the anti-image polemic in terms of a conflict between monotheism and
cosmotheism, see Hanegraaff, ‘The Trouble with Images’.
together with the shaping of modernity itself. The theological problem, although rooted in ancient paradoxes and frequently discussed in theological and philosophical works throughout the medieval period, only culminated with the protestant Reformation. Later it became a philosophical concern in the so-called scientific revolution, particularly in the context of mechanistic natural philosophy, before it finally attained a recognisable shape in the critical projects of Enlightenment philosophers such as Hume and Kant. By the time of the late 18th century, the problem of disenchantment has come to concern much more than the mere existence of “mysterious incalculable forces”. It is tied to the limits of human rationality, the foundation and reach of scientific knowledge, and the relation of knowledge to questions of worldview, ethics, and meaning. It is in this shape that we have met the problem in the present book.

The above excursus permits us to make two crucial observations. First, the problem of disenchantment is intimately connected with the process of theological exclusion that Hanegraaff has described as the exorcism of paganism. Although he does not make this connection explicitly, it makes sense to see Hanegraaff’s own approach as a form of *Problemgeschichte* focusing on “the problem of paganism” in Western intellectual history. This, furthermore, means that the problem of disenchantment is historically connected with the problem of paganism. As Hanegraaff observes, the process view of disenchantment is itself an Enlightenment reconceptualisation of the theological arguments formulated by the likes of Jacob Thomasius and Ehregott Daniel Colberg, with roots that go back much further. Through the work of Enlightenment historiographers such as Johann Jacob Brucker, who has been extremely influential on later historians, this narrative became a mnemohistorical script that orders our perception of the past even today. It is primarily

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24 We might, for example, see the medieval nominalism controversy as a manifestation of this fundamental philosophical problem. Moreover, the problem has always been at the heart of Christian theology, as an effect of the mystery of incarnation taking centre stage. Especially from the theological rejection of non-Trinitarian and docetist views during the council of Nicaea, Western theology has been founded upon an ultimately paradoxical interplay of transcendence and immanence. For the centrality of the problem of transcendence and immanence in the shaping of Western philosophy in the late medieval period, see especially Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.


26 Ibid., 371-372.

27 Ibid., 137-147.
against the background of the mnemohistorical construct of a monotheistic and rational West that the problem of disenchantment becomes relevant. In this sense, the problem of disenchantment is the modern descendant of the problem of paganism.

The second observation is this: the origin of the problem of disenchantment in a specific theological context (the problem of paganism) means that answers to it are bound to some extent to follow set theological patterns, whether these are made explicit or remain implicit. What Reformation and Enlightenment authors rejected was not theologically arbitrary, as Hanegraaff has shown. The polemic targeted what were considered survivals of “paganism”, or atavistic resurgences of “pagan” practice. Moreover, “paganism” was construed in a very specific form: according to Thomasius, the origin of all pagan error and the source of all heresies was the rejection of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. As Thomasius keenly observed, doctrines basing themselves in one way or the other on the eternity of the world not only dethroned the creator in an ontological sense, but threatened to dethrone him in epistemological and soteriological senses as well. It meant that there could, in principle, be true knowledge independent of divine initiative, and salvation without divine grace; the possibility of achieving knowledge by one’s own initiative could be emphasised without the humility required in front of an omnipotent creator who was the “ground of being” on whom everything depended. Philosophical paganism in the sense of Thomasius covered all theological positions in which god(s) and the world were co-dependent; it also covered those views according to which humankind could achieve knowledge and salvation through the fulfilment of innate capacities rather than by the grace of a supreme deity. Whether these innate capacities were described in terms of a vastly extended reason, or a faculty enabling spontaneous gnosis, they were all in opposition to the humble faith and the *Dei sacrificium intellectus* demanded by orthodox theism and the mentality of disenchantment alike.28

Hanegraaff sees the exorcism of paganism as the historical event that created a concept of what we today call “Western esotericism”. The consequence of his argument is that esotericism is not to be understood as rejected knowledge *simpliciter*, but rather as a category based on a specific form of rejected knowledge, systematically selected on the basis of (perceived) theological affinities with *panentheism* and *cosmotheism*. This  

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28 For a history of this expression, and Weber’s misattribution of it to Augustine, see Wolfgang Schuchter, *Rationalism, Religion, and Domination*, 537 n. 21.
goes some way in the direction of providing a minimum substantial basis for the concept – itself a significant achievement for the academic understanding of esotericism.\textsuperscript{29} I suggest that the relevance of the argument reaches beyond the field of esotericism studies. The observations summarised above have important consequences for the argument of the present book, as becomes evident when we connect Hanegraaff’s thesis with the problem of disenchantment. The connection between “disenchantment” and the rejection of “pagan theology” provides an explanation for the affinity between esoteric spokespersons, psychical researchers, scientists, philosophers and scholars involved with creating new natural theologies. By rejecting the main principles of disenchantment, most notably the intellectual sacrifice, the new natural theologies of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century automatically converged towards “paganism”. The case can be made that natural science itself, when developing unhindered by ecclesiastical control and without the motivation to stay in harmony with theological orthodoxy, came to prepare the ground for a return of philosophical paganism. As I argued in chapter six, the secularisation of the university system facilitated the reconstitution of such a “pagan science”. If we accept this analysis, we should not be surprised to find esoteric spokespersons enthusiastically borrowing from popular science, or natural theologians coming close to “esoteric” conceptions. The mutual attraction is based on an underlying theological compatibility, as well as a shared incompatibility with the theologically orthodox positions of theism and deism. The cultural logic driving this development was set during the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

\textbf{ON THE ROLE OF PROCESSES IN A PROBLEM HISTORY OF KNOWLEDGE}

I have attempted to demonstrate that the history of knowledge would be served well by adopting the methodology of \textit{Problemgeschichte}. Since my argument has been predominantly focused on reconceptualising a term that has often been characterised as a “process”, I would finally like to address the status of processes in general. This is necessary because one might have gotten the incorrect impression that any talk of process is by definition nonsense. That is not a case I am ready to make. I still hold that

\textsuperscript{29} Hanegraaff, \textit{Esotericism and the Academy}, 369-374.
we may legitimately talk about socio-historical processes when they can be defined clearly in terms of observable gradual changes that tend in certain directions, leading to certain results that may not be immediately recognisable at any single point in the process, and not necessarily intended by the agents of change. Such an understanding is not in itself incompatible with *Problemgeschichte*. It is, however, imperative that the historian clearly recognises that the “process” he talks about is an analytical conceptual construct that creates diachronic sequence in the material. He does not *discover* the process as an independent factual relation. When used with care, “processes” may provide additional tools for problem history. Examples of this can even be found in the present book: a process of “functional differentiation” was, for example, involved in my argument concerning the relation between science and religion, and permits a strictly empirical definition in terms of legal and institutional bonds between universities and churches. On a smaller scale, “professionalisation” is another type of process that can be defined in terms of institutional formations, and helps to bring an analytic focus to developments relevant for one’s study. Problems only arise when “processes” are taken for granted as objective realities, as being progressive/regressive (i.e. expressing some form of teleology), and/or being used as *explanations* in their own right. From the perspective of *Problemgeschichte* a process can be an interesting *explanandum*, but never a sufficient *explanans*. Thus I have sought to explain the professionalisation of parapsychology rather than using the professionalisation itself to advance an argument about the field’s worth. I have looked at the interplay of individual agents and institutional and contextual factors to account for the counter-movement against differentiation that made the emergence of a new natural theology possible. Such cautious uses of process have only facilitated and supported my problem-focused analysis of conceptual relations in these diverse fields.

The role of processes in a history of knowledge consistent with *Problemgeschichte* can be further exemplified by looking at an important recent contribution. In 2007 Peter Burke, one of the foremost contemporary advocates of a “social history of knowledge”, published a programmatic article on how this programme ought to address post-Enlightenment knowledge cultures. He did so by listing a whole panoply of processes that he thought particularly relevant for the suggested field of study:
For the period 1750–2000, in which change has been so rapid ..., I am imagining a study that will be organized ... by major trends or processes, among them secularization, specialization, commercialization, industrialization, nationalization, globalization, bureaucratization and democratization.30

More recently, Burke has brought his project to fruition in a monograph-length essay, with the focus on processes very much still present. It is crucial for us to note that Burke’s use of process, while remaining problematic, is not of the directly objectionable kind. To begin with, Burke emphasises that the processes he talks about merely have the status of trends that are neither total nor unidirectional:

... if this essay has a single thesis, it is the importance of the coexistence and interaction of trends in opposite directions, an equilibrium of antagonisms that tips over into disequilibrium from time to time. The nationalization of knowledge coexists with its internationalization, secularization with counter-secularization, professionalization with amateurization, standardization with custom-made products, specialization with interdisciplinary projects and democratization with moves to counter or restrict it. Even the accumulation of knowledge is offset to some degree by its loss.31

Most of these processes are relatively easy to define, trace, and measure, making it possible to talk about ebbs and flows, trends and counter-trends in a way that is both meaningful, relatively precise, and attentive to nuances. Although I have deliberately avoided a processual nomenclature for reasons of stylistic consistency, many of the trends and counter-trends Burke refers to in the quotation above have in fact played significant roles in my own argument: for instance, nationalisation and internationalisation were crucial to developments in the natural sciences in the decades surrounding the world wars. The dialectic of professionalisation and amateurisation was central to the development of psychical research, as was the interplay of specialisation and interdisciplinarity. These constructs are all analytically helpful as long as they are not reified, and as long as they go together with a focus on the individual actors that create the “processes” in question by the choices they make.

31 Burke, A Social History of Knowledge II, 2. Italics added.
It is notable that “disenchantment” does not appear in Burke’s catalogue of processes. That the term does not make its appearance even once may be indicative of disenchantment’s problematic status as a “process”. As mentioned, “processes” must be defined in ways that make them open to empirical scrutiny. For example, concepts such as bureaucratisation, specialisation, or industrialisation all satisfy this criterion, since they concern institutional developments that may be quantified and checked without too much trouble. The situation is rather different for “disenchantment”, as it is concerned with a mentality or an epistemological attitude. For this reason alone it is problematic to conceptualise disenchantment as a process.

Yet, there is little doubt that the marginalisation of “mysterious incalculable forces”, the separation of facts from values, the call for an intellectual sacrifice, and the attempted elimination of “magic”, “paganism”, and the “occult” from establishment culture represent important intellectual trends that are in need of being studied and understood for a satisfying picture of modern Western intellectual history to take shape. Burke’s social history of knowledge might superficially grasp some of these developments through a focus on processes such as bureaucratisation, secularisation, and professionalisation, but for a proper qualitative understanding of the issues at hand as well as their historical provenance they will inevitably remain insufficient. The undertaking of exploring the complex intellectual and religious concerns that are conveniently summed up by the word Entzauberung must take the form of a problem history rather than a process-oriented narrative history.

A Final Note on Objectivity and Neutrality

In closing we must face the fact that a serious dilemma still looms in front of the problem historian. He has boldly stated that academic identities are not fixed; the problem of disenchantment remained central to the ongoing negotiations about what science and the academy are supposed to be. What does it mean to point this out, as a scholar and an academic? Where does this apparently privileged position to analyse the identity-construction of one’s peers come from? Complicating things even further, the

32 Neither does it appear in his previous book on the history of knowledge, which focused on the period from the emergence of printing in Europe to the writing of the encyclopaedias; Burke, A Social History of Knowledge.
problem historian has demonstrated that questions of scientific identity are closely intertwined with questions of methodology, to such an extent that a claim about one must imply a claim about the other. Where does this place the historian himself, with his insistence on following certain strict methodological requirements while actively discouraging others? It has been argued that it was precisely Weber’s neo-Kantianism that sometimes led him astray, leading him to paint a distorted, idealised picture of scientific activity. The approach to problem history that I have outlined on the preceding pages is itself indebted to Kantianism and to Enlightenment epistemology more broadly, so how do we avoid falling in the same traps as he did? How do we make sure that our scholarly production does not end up as yet another contribution to the political struggle about the identity of the academy and its role in society at large?

The short answer is that we do not and cannot avoid being political. The only conclusion that can be drawn from the above premises is that the problem historian, too, contributes to the political dimension of scholarship, and cannot do otherwise no matter how deep he should wish it. He may engage in critical self-reflection, and unmask the agendas that have informed other approaches, but it is a grave fallacy to argue that such reflections make his own position value neutral, purifying him from the contamination of politics and ideology altogether. That is not to say that reflection is futile. The value of reflection is that it acts as an antidote to the misconception that one’s own position is self-evidently correct and must inevitably be shared by anyone blessed with a capacity for clear thinking. Reflection helps us to see that it is possible for two perfectly sane individuals to disagree on fundamental questions.

Even though we remain in some sense “political” by the very act of taking a stance on what constitutes appropriate methodology we can, therefore, avoid the most serious problems associated with such unavoidable political bias. For example, we can avoid the blind spot that was created by Weber’s original statements concerning disenchantment. The source of the blind spot, as seen in the opening chapter of this book, was precisely a lack of reflection on the role of the individual scholar in defining the identity of academic research, and an accompanying failure to distinguish one’s own agenda from the realities of the academy on the whole. When this misconception has been corrected through reflection, one can avoid projecting one’s own values of how the academic should behave into analyses of how academics do behave. Weber’s disenchantment thesis failed to clearly make this distinction, for reasons that are quite
obvious: it was formulated in a lecture addressed to a new generation of students, and aiming to teach them what the correct temperament of the scientific researcher ought to be. In doing so, it simply had to pass judgment on trends that, according to Weber’s view of proper methodological conduct, were “wrong”: for example, those who were ready to wed science with religion in their work were simply not doing science right. They had lost their intellectual integrity the moment they claimed to derive value statements from facts, and were from then on relegated to the dubious category of swindlers and self-deceivers.33 This view is fair enough as a political statement about what one wants the academy to look like. As should be clear from the methodological reflections throughout this book, I am even sympathetic to it. But if this politically charged standpoint leaks into the analytical apparatus itself, and judgement is extended to those subjects that one wishes to study, it ceases to be a legitimate opinion and becomes a highly problematic bias instead.

The difference can be illustrated by reflecting once more on my discussion of the “re-enchantment paradigm”. When I discussed scholars such as Morris Berman and David Ray Griffin in chapter two, I considered them colleagues, and read their publications as contributions to a historiography focused on disenchantment. In the end, I deemed their approaches to be wrong; I disagree with them, and think that I have strong arguments showing why their approaches are seriously flawed. To me, they do not even fit within the boundaries of what I think academic research should be about. My disagreement with the re-enchantment paradigm is, in this respect, comparable to Weber’s disagreement with the fashionable Lebensphilosophie of his own days. Indeed, the logic of my argument in this book could even be used to postulate conceptual as well as historical links between the two. However, I would never delude myself into thinking that authors such as Berman and Griffin are not “real” academics: their intellectual production is clearly a part of the plurality of academic discourse.

Intriguingly, perhaps, if I were to move on to see these scholars not as colleagues, but as producers of empirical material to be analysed within the framework of Problemgeschichte, I would therefore stress that they should be included as important contributors to modern intellectual history, representatives of an ambitious and rebellious type of response to the problem of disenchantment. For Griffin, I could also

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33 See Weber, ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf’, 509
point out the relation to Whiteheadian “process theology”, thus contextualising him as an important late contributor to the new natural theology of emergence. Meanwhile, however, I would remain prepared to use all the legitimate means of academia to make sure that the perspectives of Griffin and Berman do not gain further influence over the scholarly fields that we share as colleagues. There is no contradiction in this attitude. The crucial point is, to quote Thomas L. Haskell, that ‘objectivity is not neutrality’.\(^{34}\) I am certainly not neutral to claims about a re-enchanted science, but I do aim for a degree of objectivity in describing the problems involved with such claims. In fact, it is precisely because of the striving for objectivity that neutrality is impossible. Thus the problem historian’s dilemma is more apparent than real.

I think we can go even further, and say that it is those who would continue to insist that the dilemma is insoluble that are in the most precarious situation. Conflating neutrality and objectivity leads to a choice between two alternatives, both of which are problematic. The first option is to hold that neutrality is indeed possible, and that objectivity is based on being “neutral”. The problems of this view have already been discussed at length: by thinking that one’s own position has not only been arrived at by a striving for objectivity, but that the conclusions are themselves somehow “neutral” and “natural”, a scholar may come to treat not only her colleagues, but also the various historical actors that she studies as being simply “wrong” or not worthy of further mention. The second alternative for those who conflate objectivity and neutrality is to deny that neutrality is possible and to argue that, since it rests on neutrality, objectivity is not possible either. At best, “objectivity” may refer to certain discursive practices or “rules” relative to pre-theoretical positions of a political or ideological nature; but even then it is little more than an instrument for exerting “political” power. As far as the formation of academic disciplines and research fields goes, this option may permit a form of disciplinary “tribalism”: each discipline governs itself by the “rules” that it has set for itself, but there is no overarching objectivity to appeal to whenever two disciplines are in fundamental disagreement about what academic research is about. In such cases, all that is left is politics and power games.

To some extent, disciplinary tribalism is the current state of affairs in the humanities. Different disciplines, and even subfields within disciplines, have been able

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\(^{34}\) Haskell, ‘Objectivity Is Not Neutrality’. This essay, which was first published in 1990, is also reprinted in a collection of essays bearing the same title: Haskell, Objectivity Is Not Neutrality.
to live as separate and internally autonomous “tribes” that do not interact in an 
overarching system of mutual checks and balances (for example, each discipline would 
have its own set of peer-reviewed journals, book series, academic associations and 
conferences, without much interaction with expertise in other disciplines). This solution 
may have been attractive because of the autonomy it provides each discipline, but it is 
also associated with a number of problematic consequences. One of these is that, 
despite the term “interdisciplinarity” having become a standard element in the 
rhetorical repertoire of scholars and administrators alike, any real interdisciplinarity 
has been very difficult to achieve in practice. Broader research fields in the humanities 
have typically been characterised by multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. The 
difference is crucial: multidisciplinarity means merely the co-existence of different 
disciplinary approaches, exploring the same materials side by side, but without 
engaging critically with one another. Multidisciplinarity is a consequence of academic 
tribalism, since no group will answer to the authority of another, or dare to interfere in 
the affairs of another “ethnos”. Interdisciplinarity, by contrast, requires that disciplines 
actively engage each other’s methodologies, concepts, arguments, and findings, and try 
to arrive at some form of mutual understanding through rational, “objective” dialogue. 
To use the term I coined in chapter two, genuine interdisciplinarity must rest on an 
“endoxic principle”: it must take specialisation seriously, and respect the “good opinion” 
of experts in other disciplines. Those who seek interdisciplinarity should, of course, 
engage critically with such opinions, and might even end up correcting experts of other 
disciplines by pointing out blind spots that had gone unnoticed. By the same token, 
however, one must be prepared to throw out any badly grounded opinion that one 
might oneself have held, and recognise any blind spots that might have formed in one’s 
own discipline whenever they are exposed by the better knowledge of specialists with 
approaches and research agendas that are different from one’s own. Ultimately, this 
means that one must be ready to dispose of the autonomy of one’s field altogether.

To follow the endoxic principle and practice genuine interdisciplinarity requires 
accepting a minimum degree of objectivity. This means that the system of disciplinary 
tribalism must be rejected. The ideal of objectivity must, however, be sharply separated 
from any claim to neutrality. Steering clear of both extremes and providing a foundation 
for genuine interdisciplinarity, one that dares to stake a claim to objectivity while 
recognising that objectivity is not neutrality, is perhaps the most valuable contribution
that *Problemgeschichte* has to offer the humanities. It is my hope that the present work can act as an invitation to further research along these lines.