
The Absence of Objective Reality: Kant, Goethe, Luhmann, and the Problem of Knowledge

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Prominent German systems theorist and sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, has drawn his thought, very manifestly if one reads his footnotes, from early functionalists such as Ludwig von Bertalanffy and Talcott Parsons, and then later, from cyberneticians, information theorists and mathematicians such as Heinz von Foerster and George Spencer Brown, as well as cognitive biologists Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela. One of the appealing aspects of Luhmann is his wide incorporation of advanced theorizing on so many fields – far more than mentioned here. Important thinkers are present in his discussion, either as influences or, more often, as he differentiates himself out from their thought, indicating how his own theory has moved on from those who have gone before. In his philosophical thought, despite his seeming concentration on more modern thinkers such as Husserl or Habermas,¹ Luhmann refers repeatedly to the problems inherent in “Subjektphilosophie” and contained in the idea of a subject. Here he is referring back to Kant and the conclusion he reached in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*² and articulated most clearly in the summary of his argument contained in his preface to the second edition of 1787, that the subject³ cannot ‘reach’ the object – that the transcendental and even the subject itself are beyond the realm of possible knowledge;⁴ reason has its limits and we must stay within these. God, the soul, the infinite and the subject were all relegated to an area of belief rather than knowledge.⁵

Kant himself showed in his second and third critiques that he felt the gap between subject and object might be bridged, firstly by way of moral postulates (*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*) and secondly by art and the aesthetics (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*).⁶ The romantic movement, which set out to pursue the ideals of the third critique (*KdU*) collapsed; the problems which Kant formulated did not. It interests me greatly to see the Kantian problem of the divide between subject and object re-emerging strongly when I read German quantum physicists writing about their own work.⁷ They are quite explicitly addressing Kant in a problem which remains. And it is this same Kantian problem which is a large part of what Niklas Luhmann’s sociological theory is trying to address. Part of his project is, in many ways, writing to answer Kant. He feels his theory has hurdled the Kantian problem, as his discussion in chapter 5 of *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* and his references to Kant in *Soziale Systeme* make

clear.⁸ Certainly, as far as Luhmann's description of society based on second-order observation is concerned, and in areas to do with autopoiesis and the self-referentiality of systems, he is able to provide a subjectless account of communicative acts that appears to avoid the Kantian divide.

In this paper, I highlight the fact that addressing the Kantian problem is indeed what underlies much of the philosophical impetus of Luhmann's theory. I also want to indicate the ways in which Goethe, whose first thirty years of literary productivity were concurrent with Kant's final thirty, acknowledged and yet resisted the Kantian subject-object problem and the way in which, in that resistance, he posited channels of thought which have been pursued down the centuries. Goethe kept alive a dynamism which ultimately provided fodder for thinking which has endured and is acknowledged by major intellects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹ I believe Luhmann is also indirectly indebted to this Goethean resistance to the subject-object problem. Luhmann's thinking, situated as it is in the latter half of the twentieth century, has tended to inspire discussions centering on an application of his thought to the modern situation in society. In *Liebe als Passion* he casts his eyes backwards, but there is still much to be done in showing the significance of problems raised by Enlightenment thought in understanding Luhmann's contemporary philosophy.

I regard Goethe as pivotal, partly because of his synchronous agreement and dispute with Kant; he agreed with the formation of Kant's problem, yet refused to submit to it. Intellectually, he endorses Kant, "daß zwischen Idee und Erfahrung eine gewisse Kluft befestigt scheint, die zu überschreiten unsere ganze Kraft sich vergeblich bemüht" (Goethe, *Bedenken und Ergebung* 31). The title, *Der Versuch als Vermittler von Objekt und Subjekt*, written in April 1792, published in 1823, bears further testimony to that, as do his later words in *Faust II*: "am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben" (149 Line 4727). This intellectual cession, however, was strongly rebelled against at the level of emotions and personal orientation in his scientific and literary endeavors.

Kant's project in his first critique can be read as an attempt to defend the mechanics of Newton, especially against the implications of British skeptic, David Hume, concerning causality. Repeatedly in that work, he returns to that topic.¹⁰ If Hume is right about causality, then Newton's much-admired *Principia* lose their underpinnings, and Kant knows it. His defense of causality is ultimately a defense of Newtonian science. Goethe, on the other hand, despite endorsing Kant's subject-object hiatus, resisted the entire basis of Newtonian thought – that the subject could be kept out of science. The venom behind his attack on Newton in *Farbenlehre* has that, I believe, at its base. Because Goethe dared such a vitriolic dispute of a long-standing idol, the scientific community did not take him seriously – in fact, reviewers ridiculed

him.¹¹ Herman Helmholtz, in his essay of 1892 “Goethe’s Presentiments of Coming Scientific Ideas,” from a speech given in Weimar, was one of the first to acknowledge that, in fact, if one looks at the principle behind Newton, Goethe’s “opposition was not unjustified” (403).¹² Late twentieth century physicist, Philip Wallace, points out in his discussion of quantum that light was the Achilles heel of Newtonian mechanics – that it was with Newton’s theory of light that “things became unstuck” (154). It is the point, in fact, at which the investigations which led to quantum physics entered. Goethe loved biology and responded to notions of life force which the physics of Newton ignored.

The subject-object problem is integral to the work of Goethe, Kant and Luhmann. The three have been combined in the present discussion, firstly, as intimated, to indicate the extent to which Luhmann’s theorizing is in many ways directly indebted to both Kant and Goethe, and to link the three together by the common problem they saw as pressing – Kant in his clear articulation of it, and Goethe and Luhmann, connected across the centuries in their desire to circumvent it, and their incorporation of the forces of ongoing life – inspired in each case by biology – to which they both respond in their particular resistances to Kant’s division. Thinking of Goethe and Kant is, in different ways, important for the development of a line of thought which, as a discourse of science, leads to the functionalism of Niklas Luhmann.

A dualistic understanding of life imbues the works of Plato, and was reasserted by Descartes who explicitly separated matters of the mind and body – *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. His *cogito ergo sum* led westerners to identify with their mind rather than with their whole body.¹³ Skeptics George Berkeley and David Hume had furthered distrust in the sensory receptors to provide reliable information about the external world of objects, but Kant is the one who has the name for what can be called a reformation in thinking.¹⁴ Kant in his first critique, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, published in 1781, set out to address the challenges Hume presented to science by demonstrating that, through reason, the subject could be a source of knowledge, and yet his work unequivocally demonstrated that reason had its limits. The “I” of the subject was separated from the inner nature of the object of its gaze by an inseparable gulf: “wir [erkennen] ... die Beschaffenheit der Dinge an sich selbst ... gar nicht” (*KrV* 75), or: “wie Dinge sich selbst ... sein mögen, ist gänzlich außer unserer Erkenntnisphäre” (*KrV* 163). Information is received from the outside but, as it is mediated through sensory receptors and *a priori* concepts, direct access to the *Ding-an-sich* remains unattainable; we only have access to the phenomenon (how the object appears). The inner-nature of the subject itself is included in this unreachable domain, “da es [das Vermögen des Subjekts] denn sich selbst anschaut, nicht wie es sich unmittelbar selbsttätig vorstel-

len würde, sondern nach der Art, wie es von innen affiziert wird, folglich, wie es sich erscheint, nicht, wie es ist" (*KrV* 79). Thus the philosophy which set out to rescue the subject as a source of knowledge ended by rejecting knowledge of the self as transcendental – whilst at the same time asserting the importance of the self as determiner of what is perceived and held as knowledge.

In many ways, Kant accepted the implications of his own rupture,¹⁵ and maintained that we should concentrate on what we can know – the phenomena of experience. His rejection of what we cannot know endorsed not only Platonic dualism,¹⁶ but also the Platonic elevation of the spiritual over the material (and in particular, the corporeal). This had been fertilized by Stoics such as Marcus Aurelius, by later doyens of the church – Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin – and by more general moralists such as Della Casa, Erasmus, or Thomasius. In all of these writings, the mind seeks for pure knowledge, unsullied by the debasing influence of the undignified body. Kant's practical admonitions – carried out in his own life and affirmed, for example, in his advice on living in his *Anthropologie* (1798) or the *Streit der Fakultäten* (1798)¹⁷ – were fully in accord with a Platonic-style dualist position. Hartmut and Gernot Böhme in a psychoanalytic interpretation of Kant emphasize the ways in which his theory indicates a rejection of his physical being – both of his body itself as a producer of 'dirt' (sweat, excreta) and of his inner drives (anger, sexuality). Robin Schott, Susan Shell and Heather Benbow writing from a feminist perspective, endorse and explicate further the notion of Kant's rejection of the body at a practical level. This entails, they argue, an implicit rejection of the object by the subject – a subsumption of part of reality under the intellect.

It is in thinking of the position argued by Böhme and Böhme above that I made my comment that Kant accepted his subject-object diremption. He worked willingly at, for example, the scientific level with the implications of the split, despite his bridging attempts in the second and third critiques. Nietzsche is one of many who felt the difference between the orientations of the two great thinkers, calling them opposites. Kant he regarded as divisive, Goethe as uniting, and he drew the lines of distinction very clearly in *Götzen-Dämmerung*:

Goethe ... löste sich nicht vom Leben ab, er stellte sich hinein; er war nicht verzagt und nahm so viel als möglich auf sich, über sich, in sich. Was er wollte, das war *Totalität*; er bekämpfte das Auseinander von Vernunft, Sinnlichkeit, Gefühl, Wille (- in abschreckendster Scholastik durch *Kant* gepredigt, den Antipoden Goethes) (Section 49 1024).

The fact that Luhmann was still in 1998 trying to attack the division Kant had made clear, and that the prominent quantum physicists of the twentieth century were trying to do the same, indicates that Kant's attempts at bridges were not sufficiently robust, and that Nietzsche's reaction was justified. In the domain of aesthetics, Terry Eagleton hints at Kant's failure to achieve a transcendental rapprochement between subject and object by commenting that Kant viewed the aesthetic as "an elusive third way between the vagaries of subjective feeling and the bloodless rigor of the understanding" (17).

In contrast, although not in total opposition, to the Kantian stance is that of coeval, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who challenged the dominance of reason which had reached its apogee. It had become the answer to mankind's problems, the controller of all that was distasteful and, as the distinguishing feature between humans and beasts, the quality that was most treasured. As a result, 'unreason' in the era 1650-1800 was sequestered in an attempt to expunge it from society, as discussed by Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*. Christian Spieß in his *Biographien der Wahnsinnigen*, 1796, repeatedly reminds his readers that reason is their most precious gift from the creator,¹⁸ and details the woes that occur when it is lost. Kant, as with Plato before him, saw reason as controlling the passions,¹⁹ and enjoined his contemporaries to rely on the faculty of reason and be guided by it to find the truth.²⁰

Goethe, however, challenges this apotheosis both in his literary works and in his critical and scientific writings. For example, in *Faust 1*, the eponymous hero provocatively translates the Greek: 'Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, not as: "In the beginning was the word," which endorses a verbal-, knowledge- and reason-centered understanding of existence, but as: "In the beginning was the deed." He infuses reason with action. This change is highly significant. Firstly, it very manifestly denotes a questioning of the Enlightenment ideals, a turning from the icon of reasoning. Goethe repeats the sentiments less subtly than here in *Der Sammler und die Seinigen*, 1799, where the narrator says: "Aber der Mensch ist nicht bloß ein denkendes, er ist zugleich ein empfindendes Wesen" (*Schriften zur Kunst* 294). Secondly, the replacing of word with deed, and the articulation of that in the above statement, is symptomatic of Goethe's holism, his wanting to embrace the entirety of the person, nature and life. In fact, he follows that statement on thinking and feeling with: "Er ist ein Ganzes, eine Einheit vielfacher, innig verbundner Kräfte" (*Kunst* 294). The statement marks an attempt to redress the lopsided Enlightenment emphasis on the cognitive and to incorporate a holistic approach to thinking – at the practical and theoretical levels.²¹ Thirdly, Goethe's reinterpretation, focusing as it does not just on action but, along with that, on the outer - the manifest and observable – marks, in my view, a significant step in the direction of a

new philosophical approach which would be developed much later by systems theorist, Niklas Luhmann, but which could already be seen emerging in the philosophical work of Ernst Mach in the intervening period.

The theory of attraction/repulsion highlights an important difference between the approaches of the two great thinkers. Kant outlined this theory in his groundbreaking essay of 1786, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft*, where he argued that matter should be seen in terms of a dynamic interplay of inherent forces of attraction and repulsion. The same viewpoint imbues Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, begun in 1777 although not completed and published until 1810. In the essence of the theory – the concept that attraction/repulsion describes the vital force within matter – Kant and Goethe are in agreement. Goethe reports in a letter to Professor Schweigger, 25th Sept, 1814, how delighted he was to find his intuitions in this regard confirmed by so eminent a philosopher as Kant. However, the endorsement comes with a difference. For Goethe, attraction/repulsion inheres in the *whole* of life – animal, vegetable and mineral.²² He expected to have that confirmed in Kant's theory of attraction and repulsion: "(W)as er aber wirklich fand, war – der verdrängte Leib Kants," argue the Böhme brothers (112). Paradoxically, Kant had reduced the dynamic construction of matter to the mechanics of fixed bodies – to what the Romantics scathingly dubbed "toter Mechanismus." Organic matter or the structure, the fabric of life, he declared to be outside the realm of science. The actual human body was dirempt from the realm of reasonable discourse: "Kant [schloß] das Eigenleibliche und Organisch-Lebendige aus der vernünftigen Rede aus" (Böhme 113). So it was that, in the sciences, whereas Kant advocated physics, Goethe devoted much time to biology, the dynamic science, and animadverted upon the faults of Newton in particular, the inflated claims of mathematics in general.²³ His dynamism is especially evident in his theory of plant morphology as well as in *Farbenlehre*. In addition, he maintained that there were areas of science which were not quantifiable, which belong more to the realm of quality. Goethe, the holist and the artist, could not abandon aesthetics even in his scientific writings,²⁴ and it is significant that he once included a poem, "Parabase" in the scientific journal *Zur Morphologie*. As part of this poem he writes:

Immer wechselnd, fest sich haltend;
Nah und fern und fern und nah;
So gestaltend, umgestaltend –
Zum Erstaunen bin ich da. (*Werke, Vol. 1.* 358)

The multiple pairings of opposites express at an aesthetic level the dynamic polarity;

the verbs of motion emphasized by the present continuous suggest the mobility and flux of life which he sees in plant morphology, and in matter in general. It encapsulates the vitality impregnating his entire oeuvre.

In the realm of criticism of art and literature, an example of Goethe's holism can be seen in his review of a book by Sulzer, where he argues strongly against what could be called simpering platitudes about art and nature, urging in contrast a robust view of nature which encompasses not only the gentle and beautiful, but also the wild, hard and unruly – a force which can engulf. One thinks in comparison of the image of Kant created by his biographers and the Böhme brothers using that material, or of elements of his advice on living in the *Anthropologie* or *Über Pädagogik*²⁵ – an attitude that excluded large segments of life. Goethe disdains those who would lock themselves up, substituting the joys of the soul for those of the body, dissipating their life force in virtues.²⁶ This same embracing of nature and life also emerges strongly in his literary writings, for example in *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, where the protagonist enthuses:

Wenn das liebe Tal um mich dampft, und die hohe Sonne an der Oberfläche der undurchdringlichen Finsternis meines Heiligtum stehlen, ich dann im hohen Grase am fallenden Bache liege, und Nähe an der Erde tausend mannigfaltige Gräschen mir merkwürdig werden; wenn ich das Wimmeln der kleinen Welt zwischen Halmen, die unzähligen unergründlichen Gestalten der Würmchen, der Mückchen näher an meinem Herzen fühle, und fühle die Gegenwart des Allmächtigen, der uns nach seinem Bilde schuf, das Wehen des Allliebenden, der uns in ewiger Wonne schwebend trägt und erhält [...]; dann sehne ich mich. (7)

Werther sees the infinite in the finite, the finite as afflated by and imbued with the infinite so the two merge inseparably. To borrow an expression from Heinrich Heine, he shows signs of seeing the world as 'durchgöttert' (58). Heine is not alone in seeing inchoate pantheism in the young Goethe.²⁷ For Kant, the highest to which we can strive, the ultimate and sublime experience is reason: "Alle unsere Erkenntnis [...] endigt bei der Vernunft, über welche nichts Höheres in uns angetroffen wird" (*KrV* 222).²⁸ For Werther here, it is a sublime union with the natural world – all of it, dirt, grass worms, from the smallest speck to the expanse of the heavens.

This movement from finite to infinite, infinite to finite is seen in Goethe's attitudes to the plastic arts, to the writing of poetry and prose, and to scientific enquiry. In each case, he insists that the work be grounded in firm experience. Apropos

of poetry he advises the younger Eckermann on 18 Sept 1823: “Die Wirklichkeit soll die Motive hergeben, die auszusprechenden Punkte, den eigentlichen Kern; ... alles, was zur Verknüpfung des Ganzen gehört und in den Plan hinein mit verflochten ist, muß dargestellt werden und zwar mit getroffener Wahrheit.” In art, we are not to ignore the roughness of reality - “Die göttliche Kunst, welche alles zu veredeln und zu erhöhen weiß, mag auch das Widerwärtige, das Abscheuliche nicht ablehnen. Eben hier will sie ihr Majestätsrecht gewaltig ausüben” (*Kunst* 630). In science, it is seen in his insistence on observation and detailed description of specimens as the foundation of scientific enquiry. This was Goethe’s answer to the ontological problem raised by Kant. It also reflects his holism at odds with Kant’s dualism. By relating the general to the particular in this experiential way, he sought to bridge the hiatus emphasized by Kant.

Two further important aspects of Goethe’s divergence from Kant are found in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. This work is well discussed in secondary literature for its chemical experiment applied to humans. However, as Tim Mehigan observes, Goethe’s concept of chemistry was not ours; it had not yet become deterministic in its outlook.²⁹ He argues that Goethe’s concept, and the emphasis in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* on the human experiment, entailed free will. Chemicals (and humans), although operating under forces of attraction and repulsion and within a complex interplay of these forces, form new bonds and sever old ones according to circumstance and predilection. He thus paints a picture of freely moving combinations within pre-determined forces in the formation of new constellations. It is this notion of a free-willed, motile reforming of associations according to affinity which interests me in the light of later systems theory. Within this concept, I believe one can see the development of what functionalist author, Robert Musil, was later to refer to as *Möglichkeitssinn*, and this, in turn, is a concept which one can see is taken up by systems theorist Niklas Luhmann. It involves a breaking away from Kant which is at the same time reliant on him as the initial ground for departure.

In addition, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* thematizes a holistic stance in its portrayal of the attempts of the characters to find a vantage point on their property from which they can survey the entire land - that is, to gain a single perspective which takes in the whole.³⁰ Isomorphic with this is the notion of perspective – change the angle of view and you change what is seen and how you see it.³¹ Kant’s absolutism and dualism have thus, within the wider context of acceptance of the outline of the ideas on attraction/repulsion, been resisted by Goethe both in his holism and in his groping towards perspectivism and contingency. This endorses the perspectivism seen in *Werther* and suggests the important notions of contingent truth and polyvalence central to functionalism, which I will now briefly address in order to demonstrate how

contingency, a sense of possibility, freely chosen affinities, and observation - all key aspects of Goethe's resistance to Kantian thinking as discussed above - are also cardinal to Luhmann's systems theory which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century.

When looking back and viewing the changes which took place as the old order of a stratified society broke down - changes which were already well underway in the era of Kant and Goethe - German sociologist Niklas Luhmann interprets the society which then emerged, not as amorphous, unstructured chaos, but a society organized into myriad overlapping sub-groups, each differentiated from the others by the functions they performed - and each defined in terms of those functions. Each individual will belong to any number of these systems, according to their needs and interests.³² To paraphrase him - under the old régime, there was a single subsystem - one's social stratum - and a person was defined according to that position.

Social status ... was the most stable characteristic of an individual's personality. This is no longer possible for a society differentiated with respect to functions such as politics, economy, intimate relationships, religion, sciences and education. Nobody can live in only one of these systems. (*Essays* 112).

Wherever a group which defines itself as 'we' (and thus as different) splits off from a larger outer group of 'them,' then what Luhmann calls 'Ausdifferenzierung' has taken place, and a functionally different system has formed. The sense of otherness, or difference, is crucial here: "Es geht ... um ein ständiges Erzeugen von Anderssein" (*Beobachtungen* 15). The reason for this splitting off and system-formation is the extreme complexity of modern society. The old rigid system of a stratified society was unable to adequately deal with emerging complexity and broke down, ceding to the modern arrangement.

Complexity could be said to be the shibboleth of Luhmann's theory. There is simply too much information, too many intricacies and possibilities for any one person to deal with it all: "Alles wäre möglich," he says, adumbrating the confusion of a life of unrestricted choice. "Solch eine unvermittelte Konfrontierung mit der äußersten Komplexität der Welt hält kein Mensch aus" (*Vertrauen* 1). Accordingly, Luhmann's functionalism is predicated upon organizing, managing and reducing that complexity in order to make action in the world possible.

As systems emerge from this complex outer environment, each one develops its own codes, values and mores as it functions independently. As a result, something

of high value or status in one group may have no currency at all in another. There are many systems, for example, where having a doctorate or having published not only has no meaning, it has negative valence. These differing values then affect the meaning assigned to experience and to the outer world of possibilities, so that Luhmann writes: “the contingency of all meaning is an essential functional element” (*Essays* 61) and: “Meaning can only be understood in context” (*Essays* 88). This tenet of a contingent world – with contingent truth, meaning and experiences – is so central to Luhmann’s theory that he calls it modern society’s defining attribute in the title of his third essay in *Beobachtungen der Moderne*. In that essay, he stresses the role of observation in creating that contingency, and names it as the source of relativism. When we observe, we are selecting from a multitude of other ignored possibilities. There is always another way of observing, and it is no longer possible to think in terms of ‘observer-independent’ reality: “[Es] gibt keine beobachterunabhängig vorgegebene Realität” (*Beobachtungen* 45). What is seen as ‘truth’ depends on the perspective of the observer,³³ and thus the idea of an absolute, unchanging value across all systems is no longer appropriate. Likewise, he maintains, “knowledge can no longer be tied to some Given that every reasonable person is capable of discovering” (*Essays* 61), and he calls the notion of ‘correct concepts’ or a pre-given world ‘naïve’ (*Essays* 21). A single, universal and binding meaning attached to an object was replaced by the notion of a multiplicity of meanings made available by different perspectives. Thus Luhmann’s perspectivism accords in many aspects with that of Nietzsche, and contravenes Kant’s *a priori* categories and absolutes. Paradoxically, Kant and his emphasis on the subject and on the acquisition of knowledge via subjective processing rather than the external stimulus or object could be regarded as paving the way for this polysemy we see in functionalism. However, Kant stayed caught in his ontological net. Luhmann stepped outside.

It is central, if one is to understand Luhmann’s functionalism from a philosophical rather than purely sociological point of view, to take in the fact from the above discussion that functionalism represents a non-ontological approach and thus circumvents the problems raised by Kant. Regarding the Kantian schism and the abortive attempts ever since to overcome it, Luhmann summarizes: (paraphrase) Old Europe has come across a problem it cannot solve.³⁴ Its ‘Subjektphilosophie,’ as he terms it, lands us in a cul-de-sac of inconsistency and unproductive circularity. This particular criticism is the theme of the fifth chapter in his book *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. As Luhmann points out there, ‘subject philosophy’ in defining subject refers back to the subject in a circularity that fails to offer clarity. This approach also fails to deal adequately with the complexity of society – a point emerging more from his discussion in *Essays on Self-Reference*. Functionalism eschews the problems raised by

this approach stemming from Kant by observing instead the behavior of participants in the system – by focusing on observation and difference, two key aspects of systems theory.

This focus also moves right away from Kant's emphasis on rationality. Luhmann talks of *Rationalitätsschäden* (*Beobachtungen* 65), the damages done by a rationalistic outlook, a point emphasized earlier in the century by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who unmasked reason as a myth. They argued that the Enlightenment, in the name of rejecting superstition and myth, and replacing it with reason based on knowledge, in fact merely erected and established a new myth. The unempirical thinking of the pre-Enlightenment era was replaced by a new deity – apotheosized reason.³⁵ The main strands of this argument were subsequently taken up and extended by Gernot and Hartmut Böhme.³⁶ A conclusion of both lines of argument is that reason engenders destruction rather than advancement. Consonant with this, Luhmann talks of emancipation, not *of* reason, but *from* it, again marking a total turning from a Kantian position and from the attempt of Reason to dictate truths and valences.³⁷

Old notions of cause and effect are another issue challenged by functionalism. British skeptic Hume was the first to significantly question the existence of an inherent factor experienced in a cause which produces an effect (34). As outlined above, Kant saw the dangers inherent in this position for Newtonian physics, and said that his transcendental philosophy was needed to counteract this.³⁸ Causation was needed to save the science Kant found to be so important. Systems theory, however, adheres to a Humean line, abjuring the thinking of cause and effect logic, and the determinism which accompanies it. Instead, it stresses: “[Man’s] world is contingent; it could be otherwise” (Luhmann, *Essays* 44).³⁹ One ‘cause’ can give rise to any number of effects, and any ‘effect’ has a multiplicity of precipitating influences, so that he refers to a ‘causal nexus’ rather than a ‘cause.’ The causal model is bypassed. In this lies a giddy sense of possibilities essential to systems theory. In this matter, Goethe’s approach once more aligns with Luhmann’s late one in that he, like Luhmann to follow, resisted strict determinism. It will be remembered that Goethe in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* was thematizing philosophical ideas of free will in an early resistance to causal concepts. The refusal of Werther to be bound by the normal necessitating constraints of his era could also be seen as, at the very least, an emotional opposition on Goethe’s part to the notion of necessity which would make him inclined to also resist it at a philosophical level.

In fairness to Kant, it must be pointed out that it was at the level of appearances, phenomena, that he insisted on causality. In order for us to be morally responsible, he recognized that at the level of the *Ding-an-sich*, our inner, transcendental being or noumenon, we needed to be free to make moral decisions. Otherwise he could

see no sense in our culpability (*KrV* 35). This is part of the difference between subject and object, inner and outer that he was positing: “so wird eben derselbe Wille ... nicht frei und doch andererseits, ...als frei gedacht” (35). Luhmann, however, seeing the problems that Kant’s thinking engenders, acknowledges no such split – he maintains no absolute, independent subject and uses an entirely different mode of description – that of self-reference – which avoids the actual subject altogether. He formalizes in this way his divergence from Kant: “Die Systemtheorie bricht hier mit dem Ausgangspunkt (von Kant) und hat daher keine Verwendung für den Subjektbegriff. Sie ersetzt ihn durch den Begriff des selbstreferentiellen Systems” (*Systeme* 51). “Wir können damit auch den Subjektbegriff aufgeben” (*Systeme* 111).

To conclude, I will recapitulate on the problems and arguments raised by Kantian philosophy, resisted by Goethe and directly addressed by Luhmann.

(1) The ontological problem set in motion by Kant of the subject never being able to know the true nature of the object - the Great Divorce of subject and object - is resisted in Goethe’s holism and his insistence on experience and detailed observation. By means of these, he attempts to overcome this problem. Luhmann’s functionalism, also stressing observation – the observation of the participants in the system – bypasses the whole problem by avoiding subject/object reference altogether, and by not enquiring into the nature of the thing itself.

(2) Kantian philosophy raises the problem of absolute truth, for a stable truth across perspectives cannot be found. Neither is there a *sensus communis* in the sense he envisaged. Goethe’s perspectivism in both *Werther* and *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* testifies to the fact that he has abandoned a notion of absolute, perspective-free (observer-free) truth. Luhmann’s functionalism extends these nascent ideas and theorizes about contingent truth, referring instead of ‘truth’ to ‘truth statements’ within the system.

(3) Kant believed in innate (*a priori*) ideas – Givens. Goethe’s hatred of hypotheses, his dynamism and his ideas on morphology indicate strong resistance to such a fixed notion. As seen above, Luhmann extends this. There *are* no Givens - no laid out Reality waiting for us to discover it. Reality is what emerges from the evolutionary process of system formation, of complexity reduction and reformation, and from the observation of the action of the participants within these systems.

(4) Kant is primarily a cause and effect thinker. Goethe, on the other hand, in particular within *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, turns from such a position and explores notions of free will. Luhmann’s theory, as above, is anti-deterministic.

(5) Kant could be said to resist the increasing complexity of his age, and the changes of thinking taking place as society began the new structure of modernity as argued by Luhmann. This is touchingly expressed in one of his very late writings, where he

gives voice to his growing malaise in a changing society:

Alles geht in einem Flusse vor uns vorbei, und der wunderbare Geschmack und die verschiedenen Gestalten der Menschen machen das ganze Spiel ungewiss und trüglich. Wo finde ich feste Punkte der Natur, die der Mensch niemals verrücken kann, und wo ich die Merkzeichen geben kann, an welches Ufer er sich zu halten hat? (*Fragmente* 625).

This short passage indicates his own uncertainty within a fluxing world. It indicates his tacit understanding that the fixed points central to his own paradigm were imperiled by the current of modernity already in full swing. It is clear from Werther's worldview that Goethe embraced, rather than resisted, both complexity and mutability. This extends also to his attitude to art. In *Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil* – and in his advice to Eckermann referred to earlier – he admonishes the artist not to sacrifice details (66-71), reflecting again this need to preserve the complexity and possibilities of the outer world. As noted earlier, the complexity of modern existence is one of the foundation points of Luhmann's sociology. We reduce environmental complexity in order to create alternative complexities in an ongoing evolving process.

Immanuel Kant is in every way a philosopher who still has to be reckoned with. Philosophers of our own day, like Luhmann, are not given the option of avoiding him and hoping his subject-object problem will politely go away. Modern thinkers may accept or reject Kant, or modify him; they cannot ignore him. His theory marks the logical terminus of ontological modes of thinking. Goethe's exercising of his own resistance to Kant's divide whilst tacitly acknowledging it is also still influential. Luhmann offers a different kind of solution which he achieves by approaching the whole issue from a different, non-ontological direction – one which eschews the ontological problem as it is not relevant to the terms of discussion. He is thus able to parenthesize the problem for the present, as he puts it – which is neither to deny it, nor to pretend it does not exist. His different standpoint is that of functionalism. Only in this way can he offer a progression from the stalemate which results if we try to go further than Kant using his ontological line of thinking. The tension between subject and object emphasized by Kant and resisted by Goethe – a tension underlying the whole of the Enlightenment era – is adroitly circumvented by Luhmann. The Enlightenment and its thought – and in particular, a working through of Kantian and Goethean ideas – remains essential if we are to understand the philosophical thought of the twenty-first century. Luhmann does not just stand on the shoulders of these giants. His thought enters into discourse with theirs. The solution he posits is perhaps

the most intellectually satisfying one to be offered in our times, both because it is able to deal with the complexity of modernity in the way his concept of differentiation posits formation and rearticulation within the same process, and because of its inclusion of so many disciplines in a meaningful way. As Fredric Jameson in *A Singular Modernity* acknowledges - despite finding fault with Luhmann's tacit acceptance of capitalism, his "conventional free market rhetoric" (92) - Luhmann offers: "one of the most ambitious philosophical and sociological oeuvres of our time" (55). His theory involves a breaking away from Kant which is at the same time reliant on him as the initial ground for departure.

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Notes

¹ Luhmann finds Habermas' consensus-oriented discourse ethics to be inadequate, given the complexity of highly differentiated modernity.

² Henceforth this will be referred to as *KrV*.

³ Here, Kant is referring to the subject as agent; the one doing the thinking and trying to obtain knowledge of the objects of appearance. In other parts of his works it becomes clear that this subject is meant as a transcendental one, and hence the later refutations of his notions by the romantics and, more particularly, Nietzsche. Luhmann has continued the Nietzschean tradition in this regard.

⁴ For example: "Aber hierin liegt eben das Experiment [...] jener ersten Würdigung unserer Vernunftkenntnis a priori, dass sie nämlich nur auf Erscheinungen gehe, die Sache an sich selbst dagegen zwar als für sich wirklich, aber von uns unerkant, liegen lasse" (*KrV* 32); "wir (können) von keinem Gegenstande als Dinge an sich selbst, sondern nur sofern er Objekt der sinnlichen Anschauung ist, d.h. als Erscheinung, Erkenntnis haben" (*KrV* 35).

⁵ "Ich musste also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen" (*KrV* 37).

⁶ Henceforth this will be referred to as *KdU*.

⁷ An example of the impact of this Kantian divide into the era of quantum thinking can be seen in Max Planck's argument: "[Wir] werden genötigt, hinter der Sinnenwelt noch eine zweite, die reale Welt, anzunehmen, welche ein selbständiges, von Menschen unabhängiges Dasein führt, eine Welt, die wir allerdings niemals direkt, sondern stets nur durch das Medium der Sinnenwelt hindurch wahrnehmen können" (10). These sentiments are directly Kantian as argued in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Aage Peterson also very specifically refers to the Kantian subject-object question in his discussion of Niels Bohr. Erwin Schrödinger has a section headed, "The alleged breakdown of the barrier between subject and object" (*Science and Humanism* 47), in which he discusses Kant, together with Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg's interpretation that the Kantian barrier is, in effect, broken down (50, 51). Max Born, Einstein, Wolfgang Pauli and Werner Heisenberg all also refer to Kant in their writings.

⁸ See footnote 1, plus later discussion in the section on Luhmann to follow.

⁹ Darwin acknowledged Goethe on page 61 of his third edition to *Origin*, as did the leading quantum physicists. In *What is Life*, a book interpreting biological phenomena in terms of quantum mechanics – a series of lectures given in Dublin in 1943 – Erwin Schrödinger begins each chapter (lecture) with a quotation from either Goethe or Spinoza, the great pantheist. Max Born begins *The Restless Universe* with Schiller and ends with Goethe, while his *My Life and My Views* contains a discussion of a section of Goethe's *Maxims and Reflections*.

The most comprehensive quotation of Goethe, however, comes from Werner Heisenberg in *Across the Frontiers*, who, like Born, quotes from *Faust I*. (147-8).

In the late nineteenth century, Hermann Helmholtz also showed his debt to Goethean thought, quoting a section from *Faust* at the end of his essay, "The Recent Progress of the Theory of Vision" (1868) in *Science and Culture* (quote 173-4).

For a fuller discussion of these matters, see Fairfax, Louise, "A Vision that needs new Vision: scientific paradigm shifts implicit in the works of Goethe."

¹⁰ To quote instances just from the beginning to his discussion on antinomies, he mentions causality as an important issue, for example, on pages 35, 43, 44, 52, 106, 107, 109, 132, and 172, the recurrence alerting us to how much it is on his mind. When he directly ties that in to a personal advocate, that person is Hume. In the second reference, he acknowledges that our notion of cause and effect would entirely vanish if we tried to derive it, like Hume, just from the frequent association of preceding and consequent events: "dass er gänzlich verloren gehen würde, wenn man ihn, wie Hume tat [...]"(44). He later acknowledges this as the driving force behind his project: "niemand (wird) sagen: [...] die Kausalität könne [...] durch Sinne angeschaut werden und sei in der Erscheinung enthalten" (132). "Diese [...] Frage ist nun eigentlich die Ursache, welche eine transzendente Doktrin der Urteilskraft notwendig macht" (132). (All *KrV*)

¹¹ David Brewster and Thomas Young are two who erupt requiting spleen. Brewster refers to Goethe as a "vagrant who had reeled into peaceful domains" (of British-bound Newtonianism). "His experiments are ridiculous – his assumptions are miserable subterfuge [...] – his details are without knowledge [...] and his disciples if he has or ever had any, objects of the deepest sympathy which we can extend to the unfortunate" (127). Young writes in 1814: "[Mr. von Goethe] seems to have wasted [his] powers for the space of twenty years, by forcing them into a direction, in which he had originally mistaken his way" (428). He has indulged in "obloquy and invective: and calling in his powers of versification to the aid of his weaknesses in argumentation, he has overwhelmed [...] young gentlemen and ladies" (428).

¹² The essays by Helmholtz on Goethe in that collection range from 1853 to 1892. They indicate a significant change in attitude to Goethe on Helmholtz' part as his own understanding of what Goethe was, in fact, fighting against increased – and possibly as Goethe's own presentiments about forces and fields came to be accepted science.

¹³ See Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, 73-5.

¹⁴ Heinrich Heine, one of the greatest German literary critics of the nineteenth century, recognized the significance of this change in orientation, writing of the first *Kritik*: "Mit diesem Buch [...] beginnt eine geistige Revolution in Deutschland" (119).

¹⁵ Jost Schieren argues this strongly in *Anschauende Urteilskraft*. See esp pages 54ff.

¹⁶ See *Phaedo*, the *Symposium* or the *Republic* for perhaps the best examples of this.

¹⁷ The mind is to exercise control over the body. Here, for example, he advocates one should be master of one's feelings: "er solle seine krankhaften Gefühle durch den bloßen Vorsatz Meister werden" (*Streit* 418).

¹⁸ For example: "Überspannte, heftige Leidenschaft, betrogene Hoffnung, verlorne Aussicht, oft auch nur eingebildete Gefahr kann uns das kostbarste Geschenk des Schöpfers, unsern Verstand, rauben." (Spieß 7).

¹⁹ "Die Tugend also, [...] enthält für die Menschen auch ein bejahendes Gebot, nämlich alle seine Vermögen und Neigungen unter seine Gewalt zu bringen, mithin der Herrschaft über sich selbst [...], nämlich von seinen Gefühlen und Neigungen sich nicht beherrschen zu lassen [...] hinzukommt: weil ohne daß die Vernunft die Zügel der Regierung in ihre Hände nimmt, jene über den Menschen den Meister spielen" (*Metaphysik* 218).

²⁰ "Habe Mut, dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen." 1. Sept 1784, in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (In 'Beantwortung').

²¹ John Gearey in his Postscript to his English edition of *Goethe's Collected Works*, discusses this emphasis on action in the context of a resolution of polarity. He notes that, for Goethe, a resolution of the tensions in nature "expressed itself in action rather than thought," seeing Goethe's exhortation to action as "the capstone of his aesthetic philosophy, in the sense that it served to reconcile [...] opposing tendencies" (233). This observation relates Goethe's emphasis on action to his holism.

²² Thomas McFarland translates Goethe on attraction/repulsion's inherence in life as: "the eternal systole and diastole, the eternal synchysis and diacresis, the breathing in and out of the world in which we live, move and have our being" (303). The original is in *Einwirkung der neuen Philosophie*, where Goethe writes "die Systole und Diastole des menschlichen Geistes war mir, wie ein zweites Atemholen, niemals getrennt, immer pulsierend," 91.

²³ See in particular *Farbenlehre*, section 2.

²⁴ Jost Schieren singles out Goethe's unusual approach, his distinctive way of 'doing science' as instigating the plethora (he names 10,000 by 1985) of studies undertaken on the theme of Goethe as a scientist.

²⁵ Examples of Kant's philosophy of excluding large parts of life as seen in *Über Pädagogik* are: "Wenn man einen guten Charakter bilden will: so muß man erst die Leidenschaften wegräumen" (497). Or, "Darauf, daß er einen geringen Wert setze in den Genuß der Ergötlichkeiten des Lebens" (508).

²⁶ "(D)en Freuden des Körpers Freuden der Seele substituiert, und seine Kräfte [...] in Tugend, Wohltätigkeit, Empfindsamkeit zerfließen". In Goethe, "Die schönen Künste in ihrem Ursprung, ihrer wahren Natur und besten Anwendung, betrachtet von J.G. Sulzer." 18.

²⁷ Richard Brinkmann, Jean-Jacques Anstett and Herbert Schöffler are three who concur.

²⁸ Peter Otto discusses reason as the Kantian sublime within the context of his interpretation of Blake's *The Four Zoas*, relating the Zoas to Kant's faculties, and the blocking and release that occurs in their relationships, to Kant's idea of the sublime as expressed in *KdU*.

²⁹ Mehigan, *Aumla* 75-93

³⁰ Mehigan argues that the ultimate failure of this project represents the blind spot present in

the philosophy of both Kant and Goethe – the subject. *Ibid.*

³¹ “(E)inige Schritte von hier konnte ich die Leute arbeiten sehen.” Goethe, *Wahlverwandtschaften* 7.

³² Thus he asserts, “stratification [was replaced by] functional differentiation as the main principle of forming subsystems within the overall system of society.” (Luhmann, *Essays* 112)

³³ “Wahrheit ist dann nichts anders als der positive Wert, der Designationswert eines Codes, dessen negativer Wert (Reflexionswert) Unwahrheit ist. [...] Damit wird alles, was wahr und was unwahr sein kann, auf die Ebene des Beobachtens von Beobachtungen transportiert und auf dieser Ebene reformiert” (*Beobachtungen* 34).

³⁴ For references to ‘Alteuropa,’ see, for example, Luhmann, *SS* 621, 108.

³⁵ The deification of this new myth, they further argue, conduces to the situation which later arose in Nazism – a perfection of the business of killing in the name of reason.

³⁶ Böhme and Böhme emphasized two additional aspects which emerged as part of Horkheimer and Adorno’s thesis - namely that reason involves an anxiety about deviation at the personal or social level, and that, by trying to suppress this deviation, chaos or ‘irrationality,’ it in fact generated its opposite – ultimately leading to a destruction of the self.

³⁷ “Es geht daher nicht um Emanzipation zur Vernunft, sondern um Emanzipation von der Vernunft” (Luhmann, *Beobachtungen* 42).

³⁸ See the discussion in footnote 10 above

³⁹ This is alternatively worded: “es kann auch anders sein,” or: “alles (kann) immer anders sein” (*Beobachtungen* 103 and 95).

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