

The Epistemology of Ernst Laas' *Idealism and Positivism*

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A Thesis Submitted to  
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Philosophy.

April 2025, Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Date: April 23, 2025

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I challenge a prevalent misinterpretation within the historiography of German positivism regarding Ernst Laas' empiricist epistemology. The prevailing post-World War II interpretation inaccurately portrays Laas as a proponent of subjectivism. Such a reading, however, not only obscures the original character of Laas' thought but, more significantly, renders incoherent his philosophical project articulated in his three-volume *Idealism and Positivism: A Critical Examination*. Against the subjectivist reading, I argue Laas' project in *Idealism and Positivism* is characterized by its aim to refute the objection that empirical-positivist epistemology is a species of subjectivism. To prove this, I first demonstrate that Laas' refutation of subjectivism above all hinges on his "correlativism," the epistemological theory Laas proposed to secure the objectivity of scientific knowledge against idealist and subjectivist critiques. However, despite the fact correlativism was the foremost epistemological idea in earlier Laas scholarship, it has been largely overlooked in contemporary accounts of Laas' positivism. Consequently, I also make the case to revive the pre-World War II correlativist interpretation, showing that, if we are to begin to make sense of Laas' positivism, then this requires understanding his anti-subjectivist program and the correlativist epistemology erected to support it. Beyond rectifying the philosophical-historical account of Laas' positivism, returning to the correlativist interpretation offers a more precise grasp of the specific intellectual battleground within German philosophy of the 1870s to the 1890s, where the very possibility of objective knowledge for empiricist epistemology was contested in the dispute between the transcendental and the psychogenetic methods.

April 23, 2025

*Abbreviations for Laas' Cited Works.*

KAE – *Kant's Analogies of Experience: A Critical Study of the Foundations of Theoretical Philosophy*, 1876.

IP1 – *Idealism and Positivism: A Critical Examination. First, General and Foundational Part*, 1879.

CI – *The Causality of the I*, 1880.

KP – *Kant's Position in the History of the Conflict Between Belief and Knowledge: A Study*, 1882.

IP2 – *Idealism and Positivism: A Critical Examination. Part Two: Idealist and Positivist Ethics*, 1882.

OTC – *On Teleological Criticism*, 1884.

NIP – *Newer Investigations into Protagoras*, 1884.

IP3 – *Idealism and Positivism: A Critical Examination. Part Three: Idealist and Positivist Epistemology*, 1884.

**ALL TRANSLATIONS ARE MINE UNLESS INDICATED OTHERWISE**



*Ernst Laas in 1884 at the age of 47, one year before his premature death.  
(Taken from Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg, NIM14992).*

## §1. Introduction

The first and foremost philosopher to truly systematize and champion positivism on German soil was Ernst Heinrich Gustav Laas (1837–1885), the chair of pedagogy and philosophy at the University of Strasburg.<sup>1</sup> Though a leading educational theorist of Germany,<sup>2</sup> Laas made significant philosophical contributions and secured an authoritative reputation through his positivist ideas in both the philosophy of science and ethics.

Above all, Laas' positivism receives its most comprehensive presentation in his three-volume *Idealism and Positivism: A Critical Examination* (1879–1884), which stands as the first systematic German defence of positivism against idealist and Kantian philosophy. But even before 1879, Laas made his mature philosophical debut when he published *Kant's Analogies of Experience: A Critical Study of the Foundations of Theoretical Philosophy* (1876). With this work, Laas' academic reputation quickly transformed from that of a mere pedagogue to that of a leading Kant scholar with remarkable philological talent.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it wasn't his philological skill that distinguished his philosophical works. In all his intellectual labours, Laas strove to link philosophy closely with research from the empirical sciences in a “critical-historical”<sup>4</sup> manner. And to be sure, even if Laas was never a practicing scientist himself, like the more famous

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<sup>1</sup> The question of the “first German positivist” is, of course, contested. While Köhnke (1997: 41, 47) assigns this title to Laas, Beiser (2024: 32) recently argued for E. Dühring's priority. This thesis follows Köhnke's assessment. Although space precludes a full refutation, Beiser's argument for Dühring is unpersuasive, primarily because it relies on an anachronistic reading of “positivism” by importing assumptions from later Comtean and logical positivism into the distinct intellectual landscape of “early German positivism.” For instance, Laas himself (KAE: 299, note 128; IP1: 146, note 4) considered Dühring more as an idealist than a positivist.

<sup>2</sup> Laas' contemporaries thought his educational theories and ideas would secure him a “lasting place in the history of pedagogy” (Kannengiesser 1885: 123f); also compare Stein (1905: 178). Kannengiesser (1885), Holtzmann (1886[1885]), and Natorp (1885) are the primary sources for any biographical details on Laas. In English, a detailed account of Laas' biography has been written for Wikipedia as of 2024, which summarizes much of the main biographical points given by these three sources. Lastly, it should be noted Laas' intellectual influence at Strasburg is discussed in a very interesting way by Köhnke (1997) due to his access to exclusive letters in the Strasburg archive. Also compare Köhnke (1991: 112, 250f, 256).

<sup>3</sup> Laas' Kant book sparked critical, but ultimately positive reviews by various Kantians. See, for example, the reviews by his fellow Strasburg colleague Liebmann (1877), Vaihinger (1876), and Heinze (1879). It should also be noted that Laas' book on Kant's “Analogies of Experience” was not simply a work in Kant philology, which characterized the “Back to Kant” movement in Germany during the 1860s to 1870s. Regarding his intention to write an exposition and critique of Kant, Laas states that it serves “ultimately only as preparation and handle for our own positive foundations.”

<sup>4</sup> Laas 1872: v–vi. Laas was the favourite student of Adolf Friedrich Trendelenburg, and adopted Trendelenburg's insistence on applying a historical and philological method to philosophical problems while writing his dissertation at the University of Berlin. See Kannengiesser (1885: 124f).

German positivists Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius, his philosophical writings are marked by exceptional familiarity with contemporary scientific and mathematical discoveries.<sup>5</sup>

However, despite his philosophical contributions and influence,<sup>6</sup> Laas occupies a peripheral position in the history of philosophy. The blunt reality is that no detailed study of his work has emerged post-World War II,<sup>7</sup> leaving his positivism and philosophical influence poorly understood. It is these circumstances that motivated this thesis to examine Laas' positivism anew—particularly to correct a problematic, yet dominant, contemporary interpretation that fails to recognize a central aspect of Laas' defence of positivist epistemology in *Idealism and Positivism*.<sup>8</sup>

Specifically, the central aspect I speak of is that Laas' *Idealism and Positivism* systematically aims to refute the claim that “positivism” collapses into “subjectivism,” as subjectivism would render impossible universal objective knowledge. Against this contention, Laas responds with an epistemological theory he calls “correlativism,” presenting it both as the central core of his epistemology and as the necessary foundation for refuting subjectivism. Nevertheless, although it's been documented as the central doctrine of his positivism for more than 50 years,<sup>9</sup> Laas' correlativism has been largely overlooked by contemporary interpreters.

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<sup>5</sup> I mention this because Beiser's (2024: 65) assertion that, concerning Laas' education, “there was probably never a positivist who was so well versed in languages and so poorly versed in the sciences,” who only began studying mathematics and science “at Strassburg around 1878” completely misrepresents Laas' scientific knowledge. Two decisive facts refute this characterization. First, Laas studied directly under the eminent physiologist Du Bois-Reymond in the late 1850s (Kannengiesser 1885: 125). Second, Laas' 1876 *Kant's Analogies* demonstrates his scientific literacy through extensive citations of prominent scientists and mathematicians, including Boole, Fechner, Helmholtz, Müller, and Whewell.

<sup>6</sup> Even neo-Kantian philosophers incorporated Laas' positivist ideas into their own idealism. In particular, Natorp's “monistic correlativism” is an offshoot of Laas' own “correlativism” (Natorp 1912: Ch. 6, §11), Vaihinger's use of “fictions” for scientific epistemology stems from Laas' philosophy of science (Vaihinger 1921: 191f), and according to Lehmann (1953: 114), Laas' formulation of “consciousness in general” provided the conceptual foundation for Rickert's later development of the transcendental subject. Moreover, the fact that Laas was not just an average philosopher is demonstrated by the numerous dissertations written on him. Examples include dissertations by Gaquoin (1888), Schleimer (1891), Gjurits (1902), Hanisch (1902), Kohn (1907), Amrhein (1909), Awakowa-Sakijewa (1916), Salamonowicz (1935), and Koch (1940).

<sup>7</sup> To be sure, during the writing of this thesis, Beiser (2024: 77–81) recently published a chapter on Laas' correlativism in his book *Early German Positivists*. Nonetheless, I believe it has problems, which I will be pointing out as they become relevant.

<sup>8</sup> Only volume one and three of *Idealism and Positivism* concern Laas' epistemology, whereas volume two concerns his ethics. Hence, I will be primarily citing volume one and three. When needed, I will also cite other publications that concern Laas' epistemology. These include his essays “Die Causalität des Ich” (1880), “Neuere Untersuchungen über Protagoras” (1884), and “Ueber teleologischen Criticismus” (1884), along with his two books *Kant's Analogien der Erfahrung* (1876) and *Kants Stellung in der Geschichte des Konflikts zwischen Glauben und Wissen* (1882).

<sup>9</sup> See Lehmann (1953: 112) and Simon (1967: 371) for what appear to be the only two interpreters of Laas' positivism who referenced his correlativism since World War II, until the recent work of Beiser (2024).

What's worse, correlativism has been specifically overlooked in favor of subjectivist interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

This thesis takes direct issue with these subjectivist interpretations and makes a case for returning to the correlativist one.<sup>11</sup> That is, I argue Laas' positivism demands interpretation through correlativism—and I want to defend this claim for two reasons.

The first reason is simply that I believe if we do not return to the correlativist interpretation, historians of philosophy will fail to understand what uniquely distinguishes Laas' positivism from other German positivists. This failure will ensure historians continue to misjudge the terms and significance of the “great dispute that hovers between the transcendental... and psychogenetic methods”<sup>12</sup> concerning scientific objectivity.

The real reason, however, is that Laas' entire philosophical project is undermined—and remains beset by epistemological problems—if his positivist account of knowledge is dismissed as mere subjectivism. This misinterpretation appears among interpreters through claims such as that Laas' epistemology is “grounded in our subjective constitution”<sup>13</sup> or that, as it were, “the subjective positivism defended by Laas reaches its peak” in a “solipsistic turn.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently, such interpreters typically label him—incorrectly—as a “phenomenalist,”<sup>15</sup> thereby further securing him as a proponent of subjectivism.

As part of my defence of Laas' project in *Idealism and Positivism* against these subjectivist caricatures, I aim to show that any future interpretation, particularly ones seeking to label Laas a subjectivist, must first satisfy two prerequisites before proceeding. Firstly,

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<sup>10</sup> The main contemporary proponents of this reading can be found implicitly in Heidelberger (2006: 233), Nottelmann (2017: 15), but above all explicitly in Palette (2018: 2, 16ff) and Bonifaci (2023: 110).

<sup>11</sup> I do not have the space to demonstrate this, but this thesis also positions itself against Schnädelbach (1984: 245, note 60), who reads Laas' positivism as a species of the so-called immanence philosophy associated with Wilhelm Schuppe (1836–1913) and Richard von Schubert-Soldern (1852–1924).

<sup>12</sup> Laas OTC: 1.

<sup>13</sup> Bonifaci (2023: 111). While I disagree with Bonifaci, his account of the Laas (OTC: 1ff; IP3: 676) vs. Windelband (1884: 161ff) debate remains one of the most substantial presentations of Laas' relation to the neo-Kantians.

<sup>14</sup> Palette (2018: 2). Palette's reading of Laas in relation to the neo-Kantians is, however, noteworthy. In particular, Palette (2018: 14ff) argues Laas was the implicit target of Paul Natorp's critique of the positivist conception of the “given” in his 1887 article “On the Objective and Subjective Grounding of Knowledge.” Now, even if Palette (2018: 13 note 1) falsely claims it is only Holzhey (1986: 162) who saw Natorp's critique of the positivist given as a “main motif of his early writings,” it is worth pointing out that Palette implicitly argues against Edgar (2008: 56), who instead first claimed the primary culprit in Natorp's 1887 paper was Mach. I agree with Palette, but I do not think that Palette put forward the most persuasive response against Edgar. Palette's argument is exclusively supported by Natorp's statement in his autobiography that he was a student of Laas. However, note that Palette's claim can be further supported in more detail by comparing, for instance, Natorp (1885: 4305ff; 1912: Ch. 6, §8).

<sup>15</sup> Nottelmann (2017: 16). Against the phenomenalist equivalency with his positivism, Laas says: “This view [positivism] is just as far removed from airy phenomenism as it is from crude realism” (IP3: 687).

interpreters must grapple with the fact that Laas was a committed opponent of subjectivism. And secondly, interpretations emphasizing subjective elements are incomplete unless they also grapple seriously with his theory of correlativism as the basis for scientific objectivity.

My argument for returning to a correlativist reading of Laas' epistemology develops across the following sections. §2 establishes the intellectual battleground of Laas' *Idealism and Positivism*. That is, it outlines the contrast Laas draws between "idealism" and "positivism," clarifying Laas' project as a defence of the latter, specifically conceived as a form of sensualism, by analyzing their respective principles and the sensualist account of knowledge. §3 presents two objections Laas' sensualism confronts, both arguing that it collapses into subjectivism. The first objection stems from the alleged subjectivity of sensory qualities; the second contends that rejecting absolute reality precludes objective truth. §4 introduces and analyzes Laas' doctrine of correlativism as his refutation of the first objection to sensualist epistemology. §5 examines Laas' account of objective reality conceived as a representational structure of permanent possibilities of sensation relative to a "consciousness in general."<sup>16</sup> This specific conception of reality serves as Laas' refutation of the second objection: that a sensualist basis for knowledge cannot adequately ground objectivity and leads to subjectivism. Finally, §6 concludes the thesis by recognizing that while this work offers an initial presentation of Laas' epistemology in *Idealism and Positivism*, substantial opportunities remain for future research dedicated to a more comprehensive examination of his positivism and its historical impact.

## §2. *Idealism and Positivism*: Laas' Defends Sensualism

### §2.1. Laas' Historicism: The Contrast of All Philosophy

According to Laas, the history of philosophy is infamous for presenting a disconnected and scientifically fruitless graveyard. *Prima facie*, it gives the impression of an "indissolvable tangle of threads" of competing systems, contradictory claims, and endless disagreements.<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>16</sup> One of the biggest problems with Beiser's recent interpretation of Laas' correlativism is that he completely side-steps any discussion of Laas' "consciousness in general." The idea is so central to any account of Laas' theory of knowledge that failing to consider it undermines any epistemological interpretation of Laas, especially his refutation of the claim that positivism leads to subjectivism.

<sup>17</sup> Laas IP1: 1. Laas' *Idealism and Positivism* historical edge comes from tackling German philosophy's "identity crisis," which, as the title of §1 in the "Introduction" to the first volume of *Idealism and Positivism* makes clear,



appearance of “discontinuity” has led many outside the field to conclude that philosophy lacks the cumulative progress characteristic of “real science.”<sup>18</sup> Laas intends to show this impression is misleading.

Indeed, in the prolegomenon to his three-volume *Idealism and Positivism*, Laas argues that although philosophical systems appear to present themselves as disconnected systems that ebb and flow, the confusion dissolves when we recognize that “there are virtually only two primary types of philosophies that continually reoccur” throughout philosophy’s history.<sup>19</sup>

As the title of the book clearly implies, these “two types” Laas designates with the labels “idealism” and “positivism”—and with them, Laas undertakes to show that every philosopher since Plato has demonstrably been advancing the “principles” of these two contrasting viewpoints.<sup>20</sup> Laas insists that only with this dichotomy could a coherent map of philosophical systems be provided, whereby the history of philosophy may in turn be put back together from a disconnected and scientifically fruitless collection of competing systems into a discipline with identifiable patterns and progressive developments.

Laas traces the historical roots of idealism—which he identifies under the terms “logical realism, epistemological apriorism, nativism, rationalism, and ontological spiritualism and teleology”—to a single origin: Plato.<sup>21</sup> Since Plato, the “principles” of idealism have dominated philosophical thought through a lineage of influential thinkers, such as Plotinus, Augustine, Descartes, Leibniz, and especially Kant along with the various neo-Kantians.<sup>22</sup> Whether an idealist is a post- or pre-Kantian, for Laas all idealist philosophers share the Platonic commitment that “true knowledge” requires “rational” principles that transcend sensory experience.<sup>23</sup>

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Laas called the problem of “The Complaint about the Discontinuity of Philosophical Research.” The “identity crisis,” as a modern term, was first proposed by Schnädelbach (1984: 5, 67) and developed further by Beiser (2014: 15ff).

<sup>18</sup> Laas IP1: 81.

<sup>19</sup> Laas IP1: 4. Laas cites Trendelenburg’s (1847) essay “On the Final Distinction between Philosophical Systems” as a major influence for identifying and drawing the contrast between perennial “types” of philosophical systems.

<sup>20</sup> Laas (IP1: 16f) tells us that identifying the “principles” of both idealism and positivism was due to Lange, who did the same for materialism, and says in the preface to the second edition of his *History of Materialism*: “By going back to the [historical] sources..., the essential purpose of [my] book... lies in the *elucidation of the principles* [Aufklärung über die Principien]” (Lange 1873: viii).

<sup>21</sup> Laas IP1: 5. Since Plato marks the beginning of this dichotomy, and because he opposed positivist ideas with his idealism, Laas also calls the dichotomy Platonism and anti-Platonism (or Protagoreanism). Compare Laas IP2: §1; NIP: 479ff.

<sup>22</sup> Compare Laas IP1: 24; §§12–16; IP2: §1; IP3: §1.

<sup>23</sup> Laas IP3: 2.

Laas positions positivism as directly antagonistic to idealism and traces its epistemological origins to the thought of Protagoras, where, says Laas, we find for the first time “what appears to be a consistent recourse to experiential facts.”<sup>24</sup> In the modern era, positivism finds its historical expression in the empiricist philosophies of Locke, Hume, Condillac, and Mill. Positivism above all embraces the “sensualist” or “empiricist” tradition Plato rejected, namely the epistemological principle that the given sensory content in experience is the primary foundation for knowledge.<sup>25</sup> Laas labels the content given in sensory experience as “positive facts,”<sup>26</sup> i.e., sense-perceptions—and precisely for this reason, Laas defines “*positivism*” as “that philosophy which recognizes no other foundation than *positive facts*, i.e., inner and outer perceptions,” where positivism “demands of every opinion that it prove the facts, the experiences, on which the opinion rests.”<sup>27</sup>

But other than laying out this dichotomy in order to demonstrate that philosophy made consistent and reliable progress throughout its history, it cannot be denied that the overall goal of *Idealism and Positivism* is in fact to undertake what Laas considers Kant’s unfinished business: to resolve the centuries-old dispute between rationalism and empiricism.<sup>28</sup>

In opposition to Plato and Kant, *Idealism and Positivism*’s “critical examination” aims to show that epistemological idealism lacks justification;<sup>29</sup> the anti-Platonic, empirical, and sensualist ideas of Protagoras and Hume possess superior philosophical viability, such that, as Laas declares in the advertisement for the first volume of *Idealism and Positivism*, “there is no

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<sup>24</sup> Laas NIP: 480.

<sup>25</sup> See Laas IP1: 20f; 55f; 75 ff.; 84 ff.; 191f.

<sup>26</sup> The term “positive,” as was common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, designates that which is dependent on observable sensory phenomena, empirical verifiability, and everything hostile to speculative transcendence. See, for example, the entry for ‘positive’ in volume two of Baldwin’s *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (1902: 311) and Rudolf Eisler’s *Wörterbuch der Philosophischen Begriffe und Ausdrücke* (1899: 582f).

<sup>27</sup> IP1: 183. Note that the German word translated here as “opinion” (*Meinung*) could also be translated as “belief” in this context. It is Laas’ translation of the Greek “δόξα,” which he also suggests translating as “judgement,” “point of view,” or “belief” (*Urtheil, Ansicht, Glaube*). See IP1: 26.

<sup>28</sup> Also compare Laas KAE: 204ff. Just as J.S. Mill, in his 1865 *An Examination of William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, employed a “tactic of ‘hand-to-hand fighting’” to thoroughly attack the Scottish idealist’s philosophy and damage its reputation, so too did Laas (IP1: 17) admit that his *Idealism and Positivism* was inspired by this approach. See Mill (1873: 270), where Laas cites him stating: “the mere contrast of the two philosophies was not enough, that there ought to be a hand-to-hand fight between them, that controversial as well as expository writings were needed, and that the time was come [*sic*] when such controversy would be useful.” Note, however, Laas himself sees the unique difference between Mill’s *Examination* and *Idealism and Positivism* in that the latter does not just limit itself, like Mill, to a duel, but rather pursues the “controversial question” beyond “one person and school” “in its full, historically rooted and branched character,” “a prominent trait of the *German mind*” (IP3: 667).

<sup>29</sup> Laas IP1: §3.

reason to abandon the ground of positivism.”<sup>30</sup> There is “no reason” because only positivism can make “philosophy as a science... finally bear philosophical fruit.”<sup>31</sup>

For this reason, I conclude this section by claiming that the central epistemological thesis of *Idealism and Positivism* can be stated as follows: philosophy claims its rightful place among the sciences if, and only if, it recognizes sensualism or empiricism as the necessary foundation on which all knowledge must be constructed.

## §2.2. Sensualism and Idealism: Epistemological Principles

Be that as it may, Laas’ defence of sensualist epistemology in *Idealism and Positivism* can succeed only if it identifies the epistemological “principles” that divide the philosophical dichotomy.<sup>32</sup> Laas thus shows that, in the main, sensualism and idealism stand irreconcilably opposed on five main points.<sup>33</sup>

First, sensualism holds that all knowledge and cognition have their origin in “sensation.” In other words, all “representations,” all “reflection,” all “judgment”—indeed, every operation of mind—must be understood as sensation “transformed” through natural and biological processes. Laas argues that idealism flatly rejects this account of knowledge. For idealists, a supersensible faculty of “reason” is necessarily presupposed “alongside and above sensory facts,” because objective knowledge for them transcends the mere particulars of what is given in sensory experience.

Second, if knowledge originates in sensation, it must develop through empirical mechanisms of “perception,” “feeling,” “memory,” “reproduction,” “comparison,” and “abstraction.”<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, if knowledge stems from a supersensible faculty, this faculty must operate with concepts or “ideas” untethered from sensory data.

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<sup>30</sup> Laas 1879b: 503.

<sup>31</sup> Laas IP1: 4.

<sup>32</sup> Compare note 20 above.

<sup>33</sup> This claim is based on §5 and §7 found in the first volume of *Idealism and Positivism*, and I would like to note that I am not referencing Laas’ “Five Main Motifs of Platonic Anti-Sensualism” established later in §11 and developed from §§12–16. I believe these five motifs of idealism are simply Laas’ identification of the intellectual “needs” characterizing idealist thinking, which sensualists do not “feel.” However, due to space constraints, this thought must remain undeveloped.

<sup>34</sup> Laas IP1: 39–43.

Third, sensualism recognizes only differences of degree between human and animal cognition, whereas idealism insists on some “divine” or “original” quality in humans, constituting a difference in kind.

Fourth, sensualism views scientific knowledge as merely a refined form and extension of practical “opinion” or “belief” (*Meinung*) since both are ultimately derived from sensory experience.<sup>35</sup> Yet, for idealism, if humans possess transcendent faculties, science can access universal truths inaccessible to the opinions grounded in experience; this means there is a difference in kind, not degree, between scientific knowledge and practical opinion.

Finally, the battle between sensualism and idealism culminates in opposing principles on the nature of “truth” itself. Sensualism rejects the idea that truth requires foundations beyond sensory experience, such as “supersensible principles” or an “absolute reality” that our perceptions must accurately mirror. For sensualists, truth emerges directly from sensory data. Idealism, conversely, insists that objective knowledge, and therefore truth, fundamentally depends on being grounded in either supersensible principles or an absolute reality.<sup>36</sup>

Now that the basic principles distinguishing sensualist and idealist views on knowledge are laid out, the next step to grasp Laas’ positivism is to scrutinize his sensualism’s attempt to construct a coherent epistemology from purely empirical grounds. For if all cognition begins in sensation, Laas’ epistemological task becomes explaining how raw perceptual data transforms into systematic knowledge without appealing to supersensible faculties. Let’s turn, then, to his account of sensualism’s specific mechanisms for knowledge-formation and their philosophical implications.

### §2.3. Sensualist Epistemology

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<sup>35</sup> Laas IP1: 45.

<sup>36</sup> Laas summarizes all these points succinctly. “When *sensualism* teaches,” he says, “that all representations, no matter how sublime and subtle, are only original or lawfully derived and altered (‘transformed’) sensations (perceptions), Plato and Kant assume, alongside and above sensory facts, a spontaneously active, mental faculty (‘reason’)—not found within animals, yet specifically in humans—operating with ‘pure’ forms and concepts from which all ‘thinking’ and ‘knowing’ take their origin and ‘validity’; and which therefore not only have the power and authority to judge all possible experience prior to all experience, but also possibly to reach beyond the realm of what is perceived, indeed what is perceivable with ontological statements: what the skepticism that emerges from sensualism fundamentally doubts; just as it finds between humans and animals only a gradual, albeit progressively increasing, difference.” (IP3: 3).

To begin, I would like to note that Laas insists his commitment to establishing his epistemological foundation in sensation stems from the presupposition that the work of knowledge and science has to begin with what is secure and certain.<sup>37</sup> Though our sense-perceptions occasionally deceive us, for Laas, they are nevertheless a solid foundation for knowledge. What sensations present to consciousness in the “here and now” (*hic et nunc*) is immediately evidential,<sup>38</sup> a quality about them Laas describes as the “rigid factualities of pure experience.”<sup>39</sup> By “pure experience,” Laas simply refers to the inescapable, directly given character of raw sensory data: the brute facts of awareness that impose themselves upon consciousness prior to any interpretation or judgment. Just try not to perceive the sweetness of an apple when you taste it. You can’t, precisely because the sensation itself, the “quale”<sup>40</sup> of sweetness, presents itself as an undeniable, non-negotiable fact of your immediate experience in that moment. The immediate actuality attributed to all sense-perceptions leads Laas’ sensualism to establish a “sensation-capable consciousness” as the exclusive foundation for its scientific epistemology.<sup>41</sup>

Laas constructs his sensualist epistemology on this “sensation-capable consciousness” with some basic distinctions. “Sensation” (*Empfindung*) and “feeling” (*Gefühl*) constitute the original facts of “pure experience,” in which Laas utilizes the Kantian division between “inner” and “outer sense.” He designates “sensations” as qualities of the outer sense and contrasts them with the “feelings” as those of the inner sense;<sup>42</sup> both encompass what Laas means by “perception” (*Warnehmung*).<sup>43</sup> To these elements, he adds memory (*Gedächtnis*) as a basic

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<sup>37</sup> For Laas, regarding sensation, he says “there is no certainty... that would reach beyond it” (IP1: 218), as “that which is given in each moment is the first and the most real” (IP3: 403). Laas also wants to keep things simple and thus also appeals to Occam’s Razor. As he says: “We pay homage to the old Occamian principle: ‘Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity’ [*Entia praeter necessitatem non sunt multiplicanda*]. We see no scientific necessity demonstrated for positing a space-timeless being” (IP3: 458), by which he means that which is not given in the “positive facts” of “pure experience.”

<sup>38</sup> Compare Laas KAE: 121, 191, 211, 239; IP1: 40, 213, 219, 229; IP3: 26, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Laas IP3: 40. The term “pure experience” first appears in the third volume of *Idealism and Positivism*. Compare its further use at IP3: 538f, 661–4.

<sup>40</sup> Laas IP1: 37; compare 209.

<sup>41</sup> Laas IP3: 684.

<sup>42</sup> “Feelings are merely individual and subjective... we would designate feelings as affections of the internal sense” (IP3: 452f); “let the object and Kant’s form of outer sense... be affected by sensory contents [i.e. sensation]” (IP3: 480). Compare above Laas’ definition of positivism given in §2.1; Laas’ concepts of “sensation” and “feeling” will be further elaborated in my discussion of correlativism in §4.

<sup>43</sup> “*Warnehmung*” or “*warnehmen*” is Laas’ idiosyncratic spelling that he consistently used instead of the regular German “*wahrnehmen*.” Note this use of the “*warnehmen*” instead of “*wahrnehmen*” begins with the publication of *Idealism and Positivism*.

condition of mental life. Without memory's capacity to reproduce past perceptions as representations, no complex cognitive structure could possibly emerge.<sup>44</sup> Lastly, Laas makes a firm distinction between representation (*Vorstellung*) and perception.<sup>45</sup> All representations are derived from perceptions and are equivalent, says Laas, to Humean "ideas,"<sup>46</sup> that is, faint, weaker versions of perceptions, created through abstraction and memory, which in due course transform into "thinking" (*Denken*), "reason" (*Vernunft*) and finally into "cognition" (*Erkennen*).

Here we can easily highlight Laas' break with the idealist-rationalist account of cognition. For Laas, there exists no consciousness prior to or independent of sensory experience; mental life both emerges from and depends on our sensory engagement with the world around us. Even while acknowledging the difficulty in explaining every specific cognitive process within conscious experience as merely gradual variations of sensation, Laas insists—and at every turn he tries to show the empirical evidence strongly supports him here—that "thinking," "reason," or any other higher mental function, must always appear chronologically after sense-perception. In this sense, for Laas, higher-order cognition and knowledge are products of naturalistic and biological developmental processes ultimately rooted in "perception."

Laas positions the perceiving subject's sensory "stimulation by needs" (*Regung das Bedürfniss*), dictated by feelings of "pleasure and displeasure" (*Lust und Unlust*), as the driving force behind all cognitive development.<sup>47</sup> He justifies this claim using a concept extracted from Lotze's *Medical Psychology*—namely, Lotze's concept of a primitive conscious state of "unease" (*Unruhe*).<sup>48</sup> Though perhaps not immediately obvious, this appropriation is necessary for Laas' sensualist epistemology because it makes it possible to trace the continuous development from our most rudimentary biological stirrings (rooted in our "sensation-capable consciousness") to

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<sup>44</sup> Compare Laas IP1: 47f, 51, 188, 190, 205, 212, 239; CI: 27f, 46f, 187; IP3: 32, 54. — To quickly illustrate Laas' point: imagine being unable to remember who the people you live with are every time you see them. No knowledge of who they are would be possible; you would have to relearn their names every time you perceive them.

<sup>45</sup> "Within our conscious life, we distinguished from the outset between the domain of immediate, original ('inner' and 'outer') perception and that of representation" (KAE: 121).

<sup>46</sup> "Every perception, and perceptibility, is original and every memory and anticipation of it is representation... If one distinguishes, following Hume's excellent indication, between actual 'representations' and original perceptual facts, everything will be in order; and the claims of the word representation need not trouble us further" (IP3: 49).

<sup>47</sup> Laas IP3: 32.

<sup>48</sup> See Lotze (1852: 299ff). Laas traces this concept of "unease" originally to Leibniz, who stated in his *New Essays*: "The uneasiness a man finds in himself upon the absence of any thing, whose present enjoyment carries the idea of delight with it, is that we call desire... The chief if not only spur to human industry and action is uneasiness... In German, the word for the balance of a clock is *Unruhe*... and one can take that for a model of how it is in our bodies, which can never be perfectly at their ease" (Leibniz 1704: Bk. II, Ch. 20, §6).

our most abstract intellectual achievements and scientific “representations.” That said, what do Lotze and Laas mean by “unease”?

What Lotze and Laas mean by “unease” is a primitive conscious state of seeking something without any representation of its object—that is, a pressing “need” or demand accompanied by a lack of knowledge of what might satisfy it.<sup>49</sup> A newborn’s cry illustrates this clearly: the infant cries from hunger yet possesses no concept of food; it experiences frustration yet cannot distinguish between cold, hunger, or pain.

However, this initial state of unease does not persist. Through repeated sequences of satisfaction and frustration arising from the raw facts of “sensation” and “feeling,” the child who once cried indiscriminately eventually learns to reach deliberately for the bottle when hungry or seek the blanket when cold. Why? Because each satisfaction has recorded itself as a fact in memory, creating pathways that, in turn, route this directed-yet-directionless seeking into psychological “drives.”<sup>50</sup>

Now, a “drive” for Laas emerges when the conscious state of “unease” stops being blind and transforms by acquiring a target, direction, and specificity. Unlike mere “uneasiness,” “drives” possess an implicit “if-then” structure.<sup>51</sup> In the state of unease, the sensation-capable consciousness can only restlessly search for some unknown  $x$  that would satisfy its needs. At best, the cognition it has of the world amounts to: “I feel a need to be satisfied”; “I perceive my environment, seeking to satisfy it.” With “drives,” however, cognition transforms into: “if I feel thirsty, then I need water.” And so, the main difference between the psychological “drives” and states of “unease” is that a drive contains within itself the primitive representational element that unease completely lacks.<sup>52</sup>

According to Laas, this primitive empirical process—rooted in biological needs and leading to causal representations—in fact contains the seed of all conceptual thought, the very possibility of objective knowledge itself. For Laas, it is this generalization of cause-and-effect relationships, in other words, that marks the transition from the “bare sensation”<sup>53</sup> of “pure experience” towards genuine cognition. There was indeed a time when all we could perceive was

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<sup>49</sup> Laas IP1: 47, note 5. Also compare KAE: 266; IP1: 204f; CI: 38f; IP3: 230ff.

<sup>50</sup> Laas CI: 24, 51, 195; IP3: 32f.

<sup>51</sup> See Laas KAE: 83–5; compare Laas CI: 194; IP3: 261, 669.

<sup>52</sup> Laas IP3: 48f.

<sup>53</sup> Laas IP1: 50.

incoherent and unintelligible flux; yet, by abstracting from perceptions, forming mental representations, and then associating them causally, the chaotic perceptual world of sensation organizes itself around abstract categories and concepts. For Laas, therefore, our scientific explanation of nature is driven by both “facts and needs.”<sup>54</sup>

To explain how the mind efficiently manages this process of forming and utilizing causal representations amidst the overwhelming “factualities of pure experience,” Laas introduces the concept of “the goal-directed economization of representations.”<sup>55</sup> Or more simply put, he recognized that trying to process every detail around us in the world of perception is simply overwhelming and impractical—a “hindering burden,” as he put it. Therefore, to “master” and navigate this perceptual flux without being paralyzed by detail, the mind actively filters irrelevant “ballast” by employing representations as efficient mental shortcuts, such as abstract concepts and, especially, language. These shortcuts, Laas believes, are necessary for human cognition to represent causal patterns: they allow, in other words, basic animalistic cognition to abstractly categorize sensory noise and recognize the underlying regularities hidden within the given facts of “pure experience.”<sup>56</sup> As he repeatedly insists, this process is ultimately rooted in the biological imperative to conserve resources, driven by our practical and theoretical interests.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, Laas’ main claim here is that this very mechanism of “goal-directed economization of representations” is geared towards “foreseeing the future as correctly as is necessary for our interests”: the “highest achievement,” he claims, “towards which the regulation of the flow of representations strives.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Laas IP3: 188. Moreover, Laas even suggests that certain scientific conclusions might be resisted if they feel “repugnant” or contradict deeply held “feelings and habits of responsibility and retribution.” In such cases, Laas implies, the application of natural laws might be pragmatically restricted, treated “as if” universally valid, to protect our ethical “calculus of imputation” (IP3: 259f).

<sup>55</sup> Laas CI: 194f. Mach (1882: 12ff) would two years later put forward a similar view two years later in his lecture “The Economical Nature of Physical Inquiry.”

<sup>56</sup> According to Laas, these cognitive tools, like language, allow “thinking” to proceed rapidly “from representation to representation and from thought to thought with a minimum [amount of energy] for actual, developed consciousness” (CI: 195).

<sup>57</sup> This is the correlated principle of “the goal-directed economization of representations” for Laas, which he calls “*economic principle of most purposeful use of energy*” (CI: 196f).

<sup>58</sup> Laas CI: 197. Compare IP3: 33, where Laas expands on this need to foresee, which he designated as the positivist slogan: “And so, step by step, from each success through increasingly stimulating need, all the small and large efforts develop, becoming ever more comprehensive and refined, to see and touch the given more sharply, and so on; and then the drive becomes to isolate and fix ever more precisely the recurring connections in order to master the future with increasing certainty. This is the drive that the positivist slogan characterizes as ‘seeing in order to foresee’ (*voir pour prévoir*).”



I would like to highlight that this economization of representations into causal patterns entails that the scientist who formulates “all objects fall at the same rate in a vacuum” engages in precisely the same cognitive acts as a newborn restlessly seeking food (albeit at a vastly higher level of refinement). The gap from the causal representations “milk satisfies hunger” to “ $E=mc^2$ ” is indeed enormous in complexity, yet continuous in kind for Laas: both represent the natural attempt by animals navigating experience in order to identify persistent patterns that help guide their future action according to their subjective, feeling-rooted “needs” more effectively.

This, of course, sharply distinguishes Laas from his predecessors. Hume, for example, grounded cognition in sensation yet failed to explain how habit creates genuine causal understanding that justifies scientific knowledge. On the other hand, Kant recognized this problem and proposed transcendental categories but disconnected them from natural processes. Against both Hume and Kant, Laas demonstrates how representations of causal patterns, extracted from sensory experience, naturally justify scientific knowledge without requiring any, so to speak, “magical” Kantian faculty of reason or synthetic *a priori* principles.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, from this sensory- and biological foundation, Laas defines sensualist epistemology as such: all cognition represents nothing more than the gradual “unfolding of what already lies inherent in perception for any sentient animal equipped with memory.”<sup>60</sup> More specifically, knowledge is merely the causal “arrangement of the incomprehensibly given according to needs that it itself has stirred up.”<sup>61</sup> In this way, higher-order cognition and knowledge for the Laasian sensualist can only mean what results from empirical cognitive processes, such as perceiving, remembering, comparing, measuring, analyzing, summing up, inferring from what is like to like, and distinguishing the essential from the non-essential naturally in accordance with practical “demand” (*Forderung*), “interest” (*Interesse*), and “utility” (*Nutzen*).<sup>62</sup>

If Laas is right, however, our most abstract and successful scientific theories are not discoveries or representations that correspond with some absolute or transcendent reality, but simply economical organizations of sensory experience that make experience coherent.

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<sup>59</sup> Laas IP3: 675. Compare IP3: 117.

<sup>60</sup> Laas IP1: 195.

<sup>61</sup> Laas IP3: 220.

<sup>62</sup> Compare Laas IP1: 43, 45ff, 195; IP3: 144f, 178f, 224, 232, 297, 687.

### §3. Sensualism Entails Subjectivism: Two Objections

The previous section sketched an outline of the basics of the sensualist epistemology that Laas' *Idealism and Positivism* aims to defend against rationalist idealism.<sup>63</sup> Yet, according to Laas, this doctrine, seemingly straightforward enough, has provoked persistent opposition throughout philosophical discourse. Stretching from ancient to modern philosophy, as *Idealism and Positivism* shows, numerous lines of reasoning have attempted to demonstrate that “subjectivism” is “a necessary consequence of sensualism.”<sup>64</sup> This connection between sensualism and subjectivism, however, according to Laas, has resulted in two negative consequences for empirical philosophy, namely: “either despair or a principled—often passionately—indignant rejection of sensualism.”<sup>65</sup>

Due to Laas' repeated insistence about the problems subjectivism entails for his goal of establishing a science-friendly sensualist epistemology, I contend Laas' justification of sensualist epistemology can be preserved only if subjectivism is refuted. Of course, this is not an original view but a return to the core of the older, pre-World War II interpretation of Laas' positivism discussed in the introduction. But as we will see, the more subjectivism looms over Laas' positivist project, the more his sensualist principles are rendered untenable.<sup>66</sup>

For subjectivism is nothing less than the epistemological doctrine that asserts we cognize only what is irrevocably confined to the mind's awareness of its “subjective” mental “states.”<sup>67</sup> It draws, in other words, an impenetrable curtain between consciousness and any external reality, declaring that which lies beyond our mental states cannot be known in any meaningful sense. It is the curse of scientific-natural philosophy—or, as Laas himself aptly describes it, as that “monstrous thesis the whole material world exists only *within us*,”<sup>68</sup> such that we are stranded on the island of our self-consciousness with no bridge to the mainland of the external world.

Despite this subjectivist accusation, I tried to show in the previous section the sensualist philosophy Laas maintains is naturalistic in its orientation. I mean, Laas wants us to come to terms with “the completely un-idealistic and also un-Kantian” thought that we do, in fact, “sense

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<sup>63</sup> Laas IP3: 3. Also compare IP1: 14.

<sup>64</sup> Laas IP1: 39.

<sup>65</sup> Laas IP1: 229.

<sup>66</sup> Laas IP3: 7.

<sup>67</sup> Laas IP3: 45.

<sup>68</sup> Laas IP3: 38.

outside ourselves.”<sup>69</sup> Hence, no one should ever believe that Laas doubts that trees continue to stand in forests unwatched or “stars” burn in skies unseen when we “go to sleep.”<sup>70</sup> Any philosophy denying this strikes a fatal blow to the naturalistic commitments and objective knowledge Laas wishes to defend.

Be that as it may, two interrelated general arguments have traditionally forced sensualism to collapse into the very subjectivism Laas is trying to avoid. The first launches an attack on the nature of sensation itself; the second on the possibility of truth as correspondence to reality. It is now time to examine these, for on their refutation rests the entire fate of Laas’ positivism.<sup>71</sup>

### §3.1. The Doctrine of the Subjectivity of Sensations

The first and foremost objection is grounded on what various 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, including Laas, termed “the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations.”<sup>72</sup> Such a view Laas nearly identifies with any position that rejects naïve realism, whether ancient or modern. In essence, the doctrine states that every sensation constitutes nothing more than a subjective mental event occurring within the subject. Or put more simply: objective reality cannot be perceived through what sensory experience presents to us.

Of course, the scientific achievements stemming from the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensory qualities have proven its worth to its proponents. It was, after all, the great architects of mechanical-natural philosophy who initially provided the basic justifications for it. Their success in explaining previously mysterious phenomena by distinguishing between subjective sensation and objective reality understandably speaks for itself.

It is precisely for this reason that Laas devotes many critical sections in the third volume of *Idealism and Positivism* (§§5–9) to excavating the psychological origins of the motives or

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<sup>69</sup> Laas IP3: 636.

<sup>70</sup> Laas IP3: 686.

<sup>71</sup> Compare Laas KAE: 230.

<sup>72</sup> Laas IP3: 558. An early expression of this doctrine against sensualism by a Kantian during the 1870s was Hermann Cohen, who said in the first edition of *Kant’s Theory of Experience* (1871: 52f): “The dogmatic realist... the sensualist, develops everything subjective from real relationships and grasps it as their abstraction... Thus, all science is impossible; for that of which it consists, the lawful combination of thoughts, is the mere association of subjective sensations. Ideas are [for the sensualist] abstractions of experience, and experience is nothing but the *epitome of sensations*.” For later discussions of the doctrine, compare the Bratuscheck’s (1875: 52f) early polemical writing against positivism, along with the more positivist thinkers’ reception of it in Wundt (1896: 338ff) and Frischeisen-Köhler (1906: 271ff, 326f).

needs, as well as the arguments advanced, in favor of this doctrine.<sup>73</sup> Following the lead of Berkeley and Hume, Laas undertakes a psycho-genetic analysis to examine the reasons and the motives that gave rise to the belief in the doctrine itself. No resolution of such a deeply entrenched position can succeed through mere logical refutation, he argues, requiring instead an understanding of how such a pervasive error could have taken root in the first place.

With his psycho-genetic investigation, Laas reveals two arguments, which, when taken together, decisively establish the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations. The first argument draws upon the observation that the variability and relativity of sensory qualities and sensory illusions demonstrate how the same object can produce radically different sensations under different conditions. The second is the argument from physiology, which demonstrates how sensation primarily depends on our bodily organs rather than on external objects themselves.

*a. The Variability and Relativity Argument*

The inescapable variability of perception constitutes one of the strongest arguments for the subjectivity of sensory qualities. Consider what the claim that sensations reveal objective properties entails. It must mean that among the various ways an object appears under different conditions, only one appearance correctly represents the object as it truly is in itself—and even Laas accepts this conception of truth for his sensualism. “There is one truth alongside the multiplicity of opinions,” he insists, “there is one coherent objective world alongside the infinite variability and fragmentation of individual perceptions.” If, therefore, sensations directly revealed objective qualities, they would first of all have to remain constant when the perceived objects themselves remain constant over time.

And yet, it’s a notorious fact that sensory qualities vary drastically with time, and as Laas explains, “you don’t need Khidr’s 500 years to find the same regions fundamentally transformed” to prove this.<sup>74</sup> Autumn’s gold and red landscape transforms into winter’s monochrome; every day the noon sunlight shifts into the night’s darkness. But consider the implication if these sensory qualities existed objectively in the landscape itself: Which sensory appearance represents the “true” landscape? The noon appearance or the dusk appearance? The

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<sup>73</sup> Compare Laas IP3: 63ff.

<sup>74</sup> Laas IP1: 8. Compare Laas (1883: 239): “No one denies that humans live under changing conditions... The variability of individual perceptions is indeed an undoubtable fact.”

summer view or the winter view? We certainly cannot hold all appearances true, for this entails obvious contradictions.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, sensation also fails as a foundation for objective knowledge or for accurately representing the “one” true reality precisely because perception continually contradicts itself.<sup>76</sup> The same stick appears both straight and bent when placed in water, and the same coin can appear both round and elliptical. What test could distinguish genuine perception from illusion? Duration proves worthless, as an illusion remains false regardless of its persistence. Appeals to “normal” perception also fail, because even perfectly healthy subjects disagree about identical objects. And yet, these contradictory appearances cannot all represent reality accurately.

Sensory qualities must therefore not exist independently in objects but rather be relative to the perceiver, i.e., the subject. Even external spatial relationships—allegedly the most objective aspects of sensory experience—show themselves to be thoroughly relative.<sup>77</sup> The sun “moves” from an Earth-centered view yet remains “stationary” from a heliocentric perspective. The question “How does the world really look?” becomes meaningless, then, when we recognize that every perspective yields a different answer.

Thus, the basic contradictions and sensory illusions found within perception can be explained in only one way: that every sensory quality depends on and changes with the subject. In other words, sense-perception is relative to the individual’s position, sensory organs, and relative motion—and if this is so, then sensation must be subjective by virtue that what we perceive cannot be how things truly are in themselves.

But even if the consequence of these arguments support the claim that sensualism collapses into subjectivism, I would like to highlight that Laas finds these arguments very reasonable and useful for discrediting direct realism. However, he sees this relocation of sensations to subjective mental states due to their variability and relativity as merely being driven by an intellectual need for science, namely what he terms the “economic motive.” This move is economical, according to Laas, because it drastically simplifies the task of knowledge. That is, it allows scientific inquiry to concentrate solely on properties that are stable, measurable, and quantifiable across observers, like mass, spatial relations, or wave frequencies. By exclusively

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<sup>75</sup> Laas IP1: 191–3; compare IP3: §2.

<sup>76</sup> Laas IP1: 75.

<sup>77</sup> Laas IP3: 9f.

concentrating on these consistent, mathematical elements as objective and relegating sensations to the subjective side, science renders the scientific task more manageable and efficient in its efforts to describe and reveal universal laws in nature. Or stated more simply: taking sensations as subjective helps support universal explanations and knowledge. Thus, Laas believes that because sensations are relative to a subject who is in constant flux, the subjectification of sensory qualities is simply a necessary tool for scientific explanation, both for the economy of thought and coherence of theory.

However, when the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations becomes metaphysical— as we will now see regarding the physiological support provided for it—Laas becomes less amenable to the arguments that drive it.

### *b. The Physiological Argument*

The doctrine of sensory subjectivity further gains empirical confirmation through specific early-modern scientific discoveries. According to Laas, from these discoveries follows the “physiological or aetiological motive,” which leads to further justification for the subjectivity doctrine.<sup>78</sup> Unlike the older ontological or economical approach that sought to reduce sensory qualities to quantitative simplicity, which Laas attributes to practical reasons, the physiological approach insists on deriving perception itself from producing causes.

Now having removed sensory qualities from the objective world to establish a contradiction-free mechanical world-view, the early modern proponents of corpuscularianism, in their experiments into the nature of perception, were empirically demonstrating that what we see as red or hear as music exists nowhere in the wavelengths or vibrations that cause them.<sup>79</sup> This finding strongly supported the conclusion that perceptual qualities depend entirely on physical media and the constitution of sense organs, an idea also established by the relativity argument.

However, due to limitations in scientific knowledge, Laas explains, the early moderns could neither figure out how the exact physiological mechanisms worked, nor perform any decisive *experimentum crucis*. Therefore, to explain why what we consciously perceive cannot be located in the physical media that cause that perception, the proponents of early mechanical science “hypothesized”<sup>80</sup> a general explanation along these lines. Sensations originate with

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<sup>78</sup> Laas IP3: 81f.

<sup>79</sup> Laas IP3: 82.

<sup>80</sup> Compare Laas IP3: 91, 122, 133f.

moving molecular particles, invisible to the naked eye, caused by external objects. These microscopic particles were thought to then activate sense organs, travel along sensory nerves, reach the brain, and finally evoke conscious experiences completely unlike their causes.

From this hypothesis, according to Laas, arose a theory of perception that transformed sensations from attributes of objects into mere “effects” of objects—more precisely, into indirect “signs” rather than direct copies.<sup>81</sup> As a result, the conscious perception of the sensory quality red exists nowhere in external reality. Rather, it merely represents your nervous system’s specific response caused by particular wavelengths—and the same applies to sounds, tastes, smells, and tactile sensations too. As a result, the new scientific understanding of perception gave strong empirical support against the naïve assumption that things possess the qualities we experience.

And so, in light of various scientific studies into how perception works during the scientific revolution, the evidence for the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations was strongly verified. However, because this meant we do not directly perceive reality-in-itself but only experience sensory qualities as they appear to the subject, certain questions arose for the early proponents of scientific philosophy: Whence come our sensations? What *really* causes them?<sup>82</sup>

What emerged in answering these questions, Laas argues, was the metaphysical program of Cartesian dualism, which posited two distinct realities and was subsequently absorbed into the early moderns’ scientific epistemology. In essence, first, an external, material substance was proposed as the source of sensory stimuli. Yet, because conscious experience consists only of subjective effects (ideas, representations, signs), this material world remained inherently inaccessible to direct perception, and so perpetually subject to doubt and skepticism. Second, a pre-existing, independent mental substance—the thinking “I” or mind—was posited as the receiver of these subjective sensations.

This ontological separation, to be sure, aimed to solve the initial problem by assigning the causes to matter and the experiences to mind. However, according to Laas, it in fact solves nothing. It solves nothing because, as Laas argues, it posits “two premature, supernatural spheres of reality” (mind/body or I/not-I) without explaining how they interact.<sup>83</sup> For Laas, all this model does is let one sphere “affect” the other, generate “signs” or sensations within the subject, and

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<sup>81</sup> Laas IP3: 80f. Compare IP3: 633.

<sup>82</sup> Compare Laas IP3: 36, 83.

<sup>83</sup> Laas IP3: 83.

then somehow externalize these subjective signs into the perceived world, all “in a way one knows not how.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, since these essential processes of interaction, representation, and projection remain mysteries, Laas insists this metaphysical theory of perception explains nothing: it begs the very question of how conscious perception actually is caused.<sup>85</sup>

Nonetheless, Laas argues that even though he views Cartesian dualism as a mere metaphysical “hypothesis” that explains nothing, he also recognized that 19<sup>th</sup> century physiology delivered decisive evidence for the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations. Johannes Müller’s investigations of “specific sensory energies” demonstrated that identical stimuli applied to different nerves produce entirely different sensations, and different stimuli applied to the same nerve produce identical sensations.<sup>86</sup> It was only due to technological limitations, therefore, that the early modern natural philosophers could only maintain the doctrine of the subjectivity of their sensations as a hypothesis. But now Müller demonstrated that this doctrine was not just a mere hypothesis. That is, just as Copernicus empirically demonstrated that our perception of the sun moving across the sky is an illusion caused by our own position, so too did Müller’s law of specific sensory energies empirically demonstrate that “sensation consists in the transmission to consciousness, not of a quality or condition of an external body, but of a quality or condition of the sensory nerve.”<sup>87</sup>

So, with the doctrine of specific nerve energies, the subjectivity of sensation now had the full support of mechanical science, which would be later adopted by the neo-Kantians in their fight against sensualist epistemology.<sup>88</sup>

### §3.2. Rejection of the “Thing-in-Itself” Leads to Solipsism

A second implication, following from the subjectification of sensations, is this: If sensations are merely subjective, and if they are “relative” to each person, then reality becomes the subjective appearances given by sensations. Consequently, truth as correspondence to an “absolute reality”

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<sup>84</sup> Laas IP3: 83.

<sup>85</sup> Compare, moreover, Laas IP3: 636: “The positivist finds himself completely repelled by the employed levers of explanation (translocation of properties of things into the mental sphere, states of the subject of which it knows nothing itself, equating sensation and feeling...), as well as by the result that we find ourselves... only in a ‘hallucination.’ Only if one refuses from the outset to let sensations come ‘into’ us does it seem possible to prevent the troublesome question: ‘How do they get out of us?’”

<sup>86</sup> Laas IP3: §24.

<sup>87</sup> See Müller (1840: 254ff).

<sup>88</sup> Compare above note 72.



becomes impossible on a sensualist foundation, as our perceptions can agree only with other subjective appearances, never with “things-in-themselves.” As a result, objective cognition of external reality and the reality of other people are reduced to the epistemic status of fiction, mere representation, or an object of subjective belief, “which,” says Laas summarizing the implication, “would again be pure solipsism.”<sup>89</sup>

Now, Laas, to be sure, speaks of “truth, reality, and objects” as well. But due to his sensualism, his “objects” are either immediate percepts that result from sensation or they are representations derived through abstraction and memory from these percepts, through which we imagine or conceive further possible percepts in a causal connection that we might experience in the future. In other words, these sensory objects of reality remain objects of consciousness, such that they are always in an inseparable relation to perceiving subjects, and thereby are not objects that can exist independently of consciousness, i.e., “things-in-themselves.” As Laas himself says: “However much one may speak about solipsism: it remains a fact that we cannot step outside our consciousness,” which means “things-in-themselves cannot be purely intuited by us but can only be thought as objects of consciousness.”<sup>90</sup>

Thus, for the idealist or the common-sense realist, the deficiency in Laas’ sensualism is unmistakable. By reducing all objects to mere perceptions and mental representations, while simultaneously relying on intersubjective agreement to verify truth, sensualism attempts to have its cake and eat it too. For insofar both objects and other minds are reduced to nothing more than mental representations, what meaning can we assign to “agreement” between minds? None whatsoever, as objective knowledge demands truth; truth requires correspondence with an objective reality that exists independently of our perceptions. Therefore, when sensualism denies this absolute reality beyond perception, it severs the necessary connection between representation and reality, leaving us trapped in solipsism where external verification becomes impossible.

How does Laas respond to these objections against sensualism? By way of his sensualist theory of perception he calls “correlativism.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Compare Laas (IP3: 35) for his own account of the solipsist charge. In *Kant’s Analogies*, Laas defines solipsism as that “paradoxical and boring worldview,” where only the “current proponent of this ‘philosophy’ really exists and everything else and everyone else are merely appearances, which, to avoid constant conflict, they are gracious enough to accept as real things and persons in practical interactions” (KAE: 230).

<sup>90</sup> Laas IP3: 140.

<sup>91</sup> Laas IP1: 182.

## §4. Laas' Positivist Project: Sensualism Does Not Entail Subjectivism. Part A: Correlativism

### §4.1. Correlativism: The Basic Principles of the View

Correlativism is the “*positivistic*’ core” of Laas’ sensualism,<sup>92</sup> defining specifically what he means by “positivism.” That is, Laas’ positivism is not just sensualism, but the combination of both correlativism and sensualism.<sup>93</sup> We must recognize, then, that Laas’ definition of positivism differs significantly from Comte’s original concept, since Laas believed Comte’s version did not represent the correlativist theory he himself aimed to defend.<sup>94</sup> And as I stated in the introduction, Laas defends correlativism primarily because it functions as his response to the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations, which threatened his epistemological project in *Idealism and Positivism*.<sup>95</sup>

However, in order to explain how Laas’ defence works through correlativism, it is necessary to give a brief sketch of what the view itself is. Only then can I make evident to my reader how correlativism functions as Laas’ response to the subjectivist objection put forward by the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations.

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<sup>92</sup> Laas IP1: 211.

<sup>93</sup> Laas IP1: 182. This argues against Beiser (2024: 75), who claims there are four “fundamental doctrines” of Laas’ “positivist epistemology.” Beiser’s fourth doctrine—that “moral norms give no evidence for the existence of a supersensible”—wrongly conflates Laas’ third “motif of idealism” (IP1: §14) as an epistemological principle, and therefore I believe has not much weight to support this claim. The other three principles often associated with Laas’ positivism (sensualism, relativism, correlativism) are indeed standard in earlier interpretations (e.g., Gjurits 1902: 48; Kohn 1907: 7; Awakowa-Sakijewa 1916: 10f). However, departing from these interpreters, I argue Laas views relativism as synonymous with subjectivism, whereas his correlativism represents a transformation of relativism into a non-subjectivist framework. Laas himself draws this distinction when introducing his epistemology: “This theory of knowledge is no longer ‘subjectivism’... more precisely, it is not relativism, but *correlativism*” (IP1: 182; compare 183).

<sup>94</sup> In contrast to Beiser (2024: 2f), Simon (1963: ch. IX) is correct when he maintains positivism in Germany, both early and late, had little to do with Comte’s positivism. Beiser finds it “striking” Comte receives little to no representation in Laas’ work (2024: 76). But he shouldn’t. As Laas himself says, “the positivistic thought that we are discussing here... the thought of *correlativity*... has not... found explicit representation in [Comte’s] work” (IP1: 183, note 2).

<sup>95</sup> My claim that correlativism functions as Laas’ response to subjectivism argues against Beiser (2024: 77f), who maintains Laas’ intention with correlativism was to support an anti-metaphysical stance. As I tried to show in §2, Laas’ sensualism, however, already provides sufficient grounds to limit his epistemology to experience.

According to Laas, correlativism is principally grounded on two ideas.<sup>96</sup> The first idea is that “perception” and “consciousness” are necessarily correlated.<sup>97</sup> No perceived object exists without a perceiving mind, and no perceiving mind exists without sensory content. The second idea is that both sensory perceptual data and states of consciousness are relative to each other in an “indissoluble” relationship:<sup>98</sup> they demonstrate neither “absolute” permanence nor perfect identity across human experience.

Now, the first principle establishes the basic structure of all “possible experience,” by positing, as it were, that neither the objective nor subjective “pole” (the perceiver or perceived) has experiential reality and meaning in isolation. The implication here is that this immediately blocks philosophical routes that attempt to start from either a subjectless world, like naïve realism, or a worldless subject, like certain types of idealism. On the other hand, the second principle describes the character of the elements within the correlation. It claims that both the “sensory content” and the “feeling-conscious states” involved are neither fixed, static, nor universal absolutes. They are, in fact, variable, context-dependent, and lack perfect identity across different experiences or individuals, even while remaining inseparably bound in any given perceptual moment.

Thus, simply stated, correlativism asserts that the perceiving subject and perceived object always arise together within perceptual experience, with neither existing independently of the other. They are co-relative to each other, or, as Laas puts it, “subject and object are inseparable *twins*, they stand and fall with each other.”<sup>99</sup>

Laas’ justification for correlativism resides most of all in what he identifies as “a state of facts fully accessible to each individual and verifiable by everyone,” especially those who phenomenologically reflect on their own direct experience.<sup>100</sup> When you or I do this, we will quickly notice that in every perceptual act, perceived objects are cognizable only through their

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<sup>96</sup> Laas IP1: 211. Also see IP1: §§17–18, 21.

<sup>97</sup> Laas uses diverse terminology for the two “poles” of the basic “correlativist fact” given in experience. Examples of these paired correlates include sensation/feeling, perceptual state/perceptual content, subject/object, I/not-I, psychic/physical sides of consciousness, spirit/nature, self-consciousness/world-consciousness, and inner center/external environment. While presented together, it should be noted that these terms are not necessarily synonymous; though, a full analysis of the various distinctions is beyond my present scope.

<sup>98</sup> Laas IP1: 179.

<sup>99</sup> Laas IP1: 181. Laas believes this thought originates with Protagoras, and this is why Laas considers him the founder of his positivism. Compare NIP: 479f: “Based on Plato’s way of expressing [Protagoras’ philosophy in the *Theaetetus*], I attached the correlativist notion: All perceptions reveal an inseparable interplay of subject and object.”

<sup>100</sup> Laas IP1: 183.

relation to perceiving subjects. Furthermore, it follows that the perceiving subject can exist only when it is the “center of relation” for these cognized perceptual objects. In other words, the assertion that we might be conscious of perception without being conscious of what we perceive is self-contradictory, a complete “myth.”<sup>101</sup> Briefly consider: Could you or I possibly be aware of seeing a rose without being aware of the rose itself? No. Remove either the perceiver or the perceived, and the entire experience vanishes. A perception without something perceived is no perception at all.

Thus, when we examine our experience, we notice that subjects and objects exist if, and only if, they are in relation to each other. According to Laas, this is simply a general fact intersubjectively shared by all human experience: the, so to speak, “basic correlative fact.”<sup>102</sup>

This “basic correlative fact” likewise explains why Laas insists that the external world can only be what perceptually appears in relation to human consciousness. As he says, “nature” is not appearance because it manifests as some non-perceivable essence behind what appears in the act of perception.<sup>103</sup> “Nature” is appearance because the perceived objects exist only for perceiving subjects.<sup>104</sup>

For this reason, any attempt to progress from correlation to explain some absolute reality ultimately fails. And any argument that claims to bridge the gap between a correlative and absolute reality must either assume what it sets out to prove or redefine “reality” in a way that renders the question trivial. The transcendent, by definition, lies beyond experience; to claim that it’s possible to have cognition of it is to contradict its very nature. What remains in the act of perception for Laas can only be the irreducible fact that objects appear only to subjects, and subjects exist only in relation to objects—a fact representing a point beyond which, Laas believes, further analysis is impossible.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Laas IP3: 402.

<sup>102</sup> Laas IP1: 189.

<sup>103</sup> Laas IP1: 182; compare IP3: 264ff, 458f; KAE: 125.

<sup>104</sup> What Laas means by “nature” is the objective reality that will be further discussed in §5.1.

<sup>105</sup> To be sure, even if Laas argues that analysis beyond the subject-object correlation yields no objective knowledge of an absolute reality, he does not dismiss the notion of the transcendent entirely. There are features inherent in experience, he tells us, such as the “body’s coordinate system” and the “infinite extension of space and time,” which suggest the “possible thought” of a reality transcending the subject-object divide established by his correlativism (KP: 55). The epistemological status of this suggested transcendent “thing-in-itself,” however, cannot be one of objective knowledge. Instead, Laas categorizes such conceptions as “articles of belief” (IP3: 250). These are “fictions” or “inventions,” or “relative *a priori* constructs” formulated from experiential elements (abstractions, analogies) to satisfy intellectual or existential “needs” and represent a coherent worldview. But again, Laas’ point is

For Laas, the implications of correlativism mean that the epistemological task of philosophy shifts. Epistemology must explain how, from the totality of experienced contents, certain perceptions are “preferred” and “consolidated into a world of scientific, objective reality and material independence.”<sup>106</sup> Simultaneously, it must account for how other qualitatively similar experienced contents are relegated to the “sphere of the subjective,” that is, to perceptions that cannot be utilized for the construction of the objective, such as those associated with hallucinations, mental disorders, and dreams. Additionally, this means that if philosophy begins its account of cognition with the “basic correlative fact,” then there should be no need to bridge a gap between mind and world that was caused by the “physiological-aetiological motive.”

The real epistemological problem for Laas, therefore, isn't to “prove” the existence of perceived external objects or how external objects give rise to beings with sensations and conscious experience. The real problem of epistemology lies instead in failing to recognize the immediate, ever-present verification of external sensory objects in conscious experience as the source and foundation for objective knowledge, by mistakenly treating these sensory objects as absolute things-in-themselves separated from human experience.

#### §4.2. Correlativism's Account of Objectivity and Subjectivity against the Doctrine of the Subjectivity of Sensations

Having established correlativism's epistemological goal—to explain the preference for certain perceptions as objective while relegating others to the subjective sphere—Laas must now detail how this distinction arises within the structure of conscious experience itself. For the challenge put forward against sensualism by the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations persists.

However, if this is so, then Laas' positivism defended in *Idealism and Positivism* will have to concede to the idealist standpoint that objectivity requires a non-experiential foundation, and therefore, Laas' positivism becomes a sinking ship.

In order to prevent this from happening, Laas' correlativism attempts to refute the doctrine by demonstrating that objective grounds are discernible within the structure of the facts of “pure experience” itself. Laas' analysis identifies three key experiential factors that

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that we must always remember where this “thought” originates, i.e., the correlativist basis of conscious experience. A complete account of Laas' account of the “thing-in-itself” would have to consider in more detail the norms of empiricist thinking and the various distinctions Laas makes with his notion of “relative a priori” judgements.

<sup>106</sup> Laas IP3: 66.

collectively establish objectivity without recourse to anything beyond sensory perception. These are (1) the always present polarity of “subjective feeling” and “objective sensation,” (2) “resistance to the will,” and (3) developments of permanence for “sensations.”

Laas’ refutation of the doctrine begins by utilizing his basic principle of correlativism discussed in the previous section: subject and object are inseparable phenomena given together in consciousness. Nonetheless, Laas’ argument for this object/subject distinction hinges on his claim that states of feeling and contents of sensation are “fundamentally different” (*toto genere*).<sup>107</sup> So, what are the conditions that make them completely different in kind?

According to Laas, the distinction lies in their “internal difference,” i.e., their intrinsic qualitative difference presented in “pure experience.”<sup>108</sup> Feeling, in its most basic form, manifests as “pleasure” or “displeasure,” states of well-being or distress “localized” within the organism; that is to say, sensory qualities perceived “within” the boundaries of the “skin.”<sup>109</sup> These states of pleasure and displeasure for Laas, moreover, are linked directly to the conscious activity of “drives” discussed in §2.3—namely states of “unease,” “will,” and “need.” But Laas’ main point here is that these states of feeling constitute the “subjective pole” of experience,<sup>110</sup> meaning feeling isn’t merely something the subject “has,” but what constitutes its immediate subjective awareness for perceptual reality. Laas, therefore, equates these basic states of feeling with “consciousness” itself,<sup>111</sup> or what he predominantly calls, following 19<sup>th</sup> century physiology, the “I” (*Ich*).<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Laas IP1: 181.

<sup>108</sup> “In contrast to Reid and more forcefully than Hume, positivism makes a fundamental distinction between *subjective states* (feelings) and *sensory contents* (sensations); the latter are ‘objective’ for it from the outset; they are so not through constructive belief, but because of their *internal difference*” (IP3: 45f).

<sup>109</sup> Laas IP3: 69f; compare IP1: 189.

<sup>110</sup> “Feeling is the subjective pole of the basic correlative fact right down to the most original phases of consciousness” (IP1: 189f). Compare Laas CI 24ff, 32, 48; IP3: 62f.

<sup>111</sup> It is this “peculiarly subjective factor”—this immediate, non-spatial, affective awareness—that distinguishes Laas’ conception of the “I” or “consciousness” from Hume’s conception of consciousness as a “bundle of representations.” That is, Laas posits an underlying subjective unity grounded in feeling as the defining feature of consciousness, not just associated ideas: “Perception and representation are never without a consciousness of a living being somehow characterized by moods and feelings” (KAE: 127). Laas, moreover, in fact finds more resonance with Kant’s suggestion in the *Prolegomena* (4:334 note) that the empirical I might be “nothing more than a feeling of an existence,” which he believes aligns more closely with his own identification of the empirical conscious subject with feeling more than Hume’s account of consciousness.

<sup>112</sup> Compare Laas KAE: 125, 129; CI: 23ff, 50, 198ff; OTC: 10; IP3: 452. Laas derives this basis for subjective consciousness, rooted in the psychological concept of the states of feeling of pleasure and displeasure, from the physiological and psychological research of his time, citing figures like Müller (1826: 41f), E.H. Weber (1852: 122), Lotze (1852: 493ff), Wundt (1874: 724: “it is, therefore, entirely correct when it has been noted that consciousness

For Laas, opposed to states of feelings or the “I” are the contents of sensation—that is, colors, sounds, shapes, textures. These sensory contents present themselves on or “outside the skin,” and because they are characterized by “spatial location,” Laas believes they must consequently be linked to an external source of stimulation.<sup>113</sup> Due to their spatial and external nature, these sensory contents form the “objective pole” of experience, which is the basis for what Laas calls the “not-I.” Hence, even in the simplest perception located outside the organism’s body, Laas insists that the green of a leaf or the brown of bark must be experienced as distinct in kind from any accompanying feeling (like pleasure) or from the subjective awareness associated with the conscious acts of the subject. The perceived qualities of the tree, in other words, are neither reducible to, nor projections of, the internal feelings or subjective conscious states of the perceiver.

Hence, it is this originally given opposition between inner feeling (subject, I, localized within the body) and outer sensation-content (object, not-I, localized outside the body) of “pure experience” that forms the bedrock of Laas’ argument for the object/subject distinction in all perception. Nevertheless, from his correlativist foundation, Laas puts forward two further necessary factors that further advance his claim that “objective sensations” constitute an “internal difference” in kind from “subjective feelings.”

Laas bases the first factor on the basic experiential fact that there are always perceptions of sensory qualities that resist our “will.” By this, Laas means that, when the subject’s volitional action meets an unyielding obstacle in the perceived world, this direct resistance cannot be reconciled with the idea that the object is merely a subjective state controllable by the mind.<sup>114</sup> Imagined objects do not consistently resist our will in this way;<sup>115</sup> perceived sensory contents often do. The perceived resistance to the subject’s volitional acts serves as undeniable experiential evidence for an external “force” that operates according to its own principles, independent of the subject’s body and motor movements. And so, the fact that resistance is

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rests upon feelings”), Horwicz (1872: 230f), Helmholtz (1867: 797f), and Dumont (1876: 81f). Lotze, for example, expresses this equation of feelings to consciousness clearly when he says: “The lowest worm, when curling up after being stepped on, distinguishes in pain its own life from the existence of the rest of the world just as powerfully as the educated mind sets itself as I against the external not-I” (1852: 494).

<sup>113</sup> “This representation leads... to an *x*, a desolate something that lies opposite to us... as the foreign agent itself” (IP3: 67).

<sup>114</sup> Laas KAE: 125f.

<sup>115</sup> It is certainly plausible to defend the claim that in dreams, we can experience feelings associated with sensory objects that seem to resist our will. However, we relegate dreams to the correlative subjective side of consciousness for Laas because they are inaccessible to potential future perception.

encountered in opposition to subjective states (volitions, needs, feelings), Laas argues, constitutes further support for the correlativist distinction between what counts as subjective and objective in “perception.”<sup>116</sup> It further provides, that is, direct empirical evidence against the claim that consciousness is confined solely to its subjective sensory states. Note, however, that while important, volitional resistance is not the “primary” source of the subject/object distinction for Laas.

The second, more essential factor for establishing the difference in kind between subjective and objective perceptions concerns the fact that everyone possesses representations of object permanence despite the discontinuous nature of our perception. Above all, Laas argues that object permanence is constructed and validated through empirical processes that entirely rely on memory (recalling past “sensations”), the recognition of regularities (identifying consistent causal patterns among “sensations”), and the formation of “supplementary representations” (hypotheses about causal continuity between “sensations”).<sup>117</sup>

Of course, these “supplementary representations” are validated not by appealing outside of experience, but by subsequent objective “sensations” confirming their predictive accuracy. When, in other words, future perceptions align with the predictions made based on past sensory regularities, the construct of permanence is then empirically verified for Laas. And even if these hypotheses formed from “supplementary representations” are mere abstractions not immediately given in direct experience, it is worth remembering two points mentioned earlier about Laas’ sensualism.<sup>118</sup> (1) That for Laas “all representations, no matter how sublime and subtle, are only original or lawfully derived and transformed sensations (perceptions).”<sup>119</sup> (2) That “the concepts with which we build our explanations of the world,” indeed, “even the most rationally satisfying ones” can only be “extracts from what is given... laboriously and belatedly cleansed of the crudest anthropomorphisms.”<sup>120</sup>

Thus, here lies the crux of Laas’ defence against the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations. The demonstrable success of this process—constructing and validating permanence using only memory of sensations, perceived regularities among sensations, and validation

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<sup>116</sup> Laas IP3: 67f.

<sup>117</sup> Compare Laas IP3: 485, 684.

<sup>118</sup> Compare §2.3 above.

<sup>119</sup> Laas IP3: 3.

<sup>120</sup> Laas IP3: 247.



through future sensations—proves that the stream of experience is not merely the subjective, chaotic flux the hostile doctrine claims it to be. Instead, Laas, as it were, believes it is possible to demonstrate that the facts of “pure experience” possess an inherent, objective structure and lawful regularity distinct from subjective feelings.<sup>121</sup> The path to objective knowledge is paved by experience itself, and by demonstrating this, Laas believes he directly refuted the doctrine of subjectivity sensations.

With this in mind, now having sketched Laas’ correlativism as a response to the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider his own final summation of correlativism. In his definitive concluding statement about that doctrine, Laas lays out the essential connection between self and world with particular intensity and conviction, declaring:

Thus, subject and object, the psychological and physical sides of consciousness, self-consciousness and world-consciousness, mind and nature, the I and not-I, stand in an indestructible correlation [*Wechselbeziehung*]. In as far as the thinking and being of each individual extends: it starts with actual perceptions; all representations originate from them; the actual is incessantly supplemented by what is possible. We think and represent, therefore, we are; and we represent because we perceived; the enduring field of relationships for our representations is the objective world of which we continuously perceive fragments as actual, and which we can at any time supplement as needed through the wealth of lawfully possible perceptions. This world is our constant support and companion. It is for us as much as we ourselves are. Our thinking does not reach beyond how things stand [*Dasein*]. We cannot conceive of a more certain existence [*Existenz*] for it than ourselves. This world is as true as I myself am.<sup>122</sup>

Such a naturalistic insistence on the world’s co-equal reality could not come from someone who wished to defend a solipsistic philosophy! Accordingly, it is now time to discuss Laas’ concept of the “objective world,” conceived on a correlativist basis as this so-called “wealth of lawfully possible perceptions.” For Laas presents this “objective world” as his response to the objection that sensualist epistemology cannot ground objectivity without the thing-in-itself.

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<sup>121</sup> Compare the conclusion to §2.3 above.

<sup>122</sup> Laas IP3: 62–3.

## §5. Laas' Positivist Project: Sensualism Does Not Entail Subjectivism. Part B: The Positivist's "Objective World" and "Consciousness in General"

### §5.1. The "Objective World" and its Correlated "Consciousness in General"

The alleged success of Laas' correlativism in overcoming the subjectification of all sensations does not explain the possibility of objective scientific cognition. Science aims to establish universal and objective knowledge in order to explain and understand the natural world and its laws. Yet, if Laas' sensualist epistemology lacks access to a world-in-itself (one existing apart from our "sensation-capable consciousness" that could serve as a norm), how can Laas account for stable, shared, objective knowledge—specifically, the kind presupposed by science and everyday interaction? Laas' solution is, of course, not to abandon correlativism but to build on it, proposing a "constructive"<sup>123</sup> method for establishing objectivity within the bounds of correlative experience itself.

The initial hurdle Laas identifies is—naturally—the inadequacy of immediate perception considered in isolation, i.e., of individual correlative consciousness. As discussed in §3.1, such perception, he argues, constitutes little more than a "lawless, incoherent aggregate."<sup>124</sup> Subjective correlative consciousness will always, in other words, be flooded with fleeting impressions; continuity will constantly be fractured by shifts in attention, interference between senses, and the intrusion of false memories and fantasies. For this reason, according to Laas, no stable or universally valid knowledge can directly arise from this subjective flux, contradictory and fragmented as it is.

The first step towards objectivity, therefore, requires moving beyond this subjective immediacy through "supplementation" (*Ergänzung*) for Laas—supplementation, specifically, by

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<sup>123</sup> Laas IP3: 51, 448.

<sup>124</sup> "Our actual perceptions, considered by themselves, indeed represent only a more or less lawless, disconnected aggregate. The turning of the head, the darting back and forth of the eyes... causes some contents to disappear almost randomly and brings others forth. Continuity is continuously torn apart, and order is resisted" (Laas IP3: 13f).

“representation.”<sup>125</sup> Given that “actual” and “immediate” perception in the “given here and now” is inchoate, the facts of experience must, according to Laas, be augmented by considering a “world of possible perceptions” (*Welt der möglichen Wahrnehmungen*).<sup>126</sup> In order to overcome the flux of experience, that is, Laas’ sensualism must supplement the given fragments of perception by incorporating what could be perceived based on past experience, analogical reasoning, and our understanding of lawful connections that relate the sensory contents of “pure experience.”<sup>127</sup> Essentially, this stable “world of possible perceptions” is constructed for Laas by counterfactual conditionals specifying what outer sensations would occur under various hypothetical given or experiential conditions.

Yet, mere possibility is not enough to guarantee objectivity for Laas. The truly decisive move for Laas is what I call the *normalization of sensations*. That is, achieving an intersubjective standard on a sensualist basis requires reducing the vast range of “actual and possible perceptions” to those occurring under what Laas calls a “normal perception” or “normal situation.”<sup>128</sup> Now, for Laas, a “normal perception” entails conceptualizing perceptual experience from the viewpoint of a “normal individual,” which is simply an idealized perceiver operating under ideal physiological and cognitive conditions (Laas says, for example, “health,” “wakefulness,” “sharpest attention”).<sup>129</sup> These cognitive prerequisites ensure the “normal individual” perceives under conditions maximally conducive to the accuracy and reliability required for objectivity. Thus, for Laas, by carefully defining criteria, perception can be standardized, allowing subjective peculiarities and distorting circumstances to be systematically

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<sup>125</sup> Laas IP3: 664. Compare: “We must content ourselves with perceptions and their supplements drawn from memory and imagination for the purpose of establishing continuity and explanation” (IP3: 42f); “the actual is incessantly supplemented by what is possible... we can at any time supplement as needed through the wealth of lawfully possible perceptions” (IP3: 62).

<sup>126</sup> Compare Laas (1883: 239). This is a strategy Laas’ believes originates with Hume (IP3: 46), but Laas certainly was more inspired by Mill and Kant here. See Mill on “possible sensations” and the “external world” (1865: 178, 182ff) and Kant (1781/1787: A493/B521–A496/B524) on “possible perceptions” (*möglichen Wahrnehmungen*), where, as Kant says, what is connected to a possible perception “in accordance with empirical laws is actual” (B284), which Laas reads Kant meaning a possible perception is objective. But Laas will push further, as he claims both lacked “the addition of the normative situation under which the possible perception should be thought” (Laas KAE: note 158).

<sup>127</sup> Laas IP3: 674. Compare Laas IP1: 209f; IP3: 46, 213, 262, 454, 561.

<sup>128</sup> Laas IP3: 15f. Also see KAE: 95, 124, 127; IP3: 454f, 579f, 636f, 674, 685.

<sup>129</sup> “What we later understand as ‘objective’ begins with ‘objects’ given in space, but strips away from them everything that is individual and accidental and that resists certain maxims of order. The objective world as a whole is not an object of actual perception, but of representation, a totality, so to speak, of ‘possible’ perceptions. Of possible perceptions not of any arbitrary person, not in any arbitrary situation and disposition, but of a normal individual (equally representable by all those engaged in thought-exchange, self-identical); speaking vaguely: in the state of health, wakefulness, and most precise, sharpest attention” (Laas IP3: 454).

filtered out. In doing so, the correlativist can forge a common measure essential for objective knowledge from the inherent variability of subjective viewpoints, without appealing to things-in-themselves or an absolute reality.

Insofar as one adopts correlativism, however, such a normalized, objective world demands a correlative subject, a conscious standpoint for which its objectivity holds.<sup>130</sup> This is because, as mentioned earlier, Laas' correlativism asserts that reality cannot be posited independently of a consciousness perceiving it, since subject and object are bound together in an indissoluble relationship.<sup>131</sup> And so, Laas introduces his concept of a "consciousness in general" (*Bewusstsein überhaupt*) to fill this role.<sup>132</sup> Although Laas is indeed borrowing Kant's term, he gives it a completely different significance. Whereas Kant's concept primarily denoted the formal, transcendental apperception ensuring *a priori* experiential unity and the intersubjective application of the twelve categories, Laas' "consciousness in general" instead serves as an idealized, hypothetical "omnipresent stage" for the specific content of the scientifically understood objective world of possible perceptions.<sup>133</sup> This idealized subject, in other words, functions for Laas as a "universally human" perspective, an intersubjective framework, purified of all subjective emotion and contingency associated with Laas' original feeling subject required to perceive the sensualist's represented "objective world."<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Compare, for example, CI: 311; IP3: 140, 38.

<sup>131</sup> "We too set an object-world in opposition to our subjective apprehensions...we too integrate our psychical experiences (including the variable acts of perception stretched out through time) into the course of this world; we too do not abandon the relation to consciousness in the objective" (Laas IP3: 473).

<sup>132</sup> In the foreword to Amrhein's dissertation (1909), *Kants Lehre vom Bewusstsein überhaupt und ihre Weiterbildung bis auf die Gegenwart*, Hans Vaihinger writes: "Since I became aware of the importance of the concept of 'consciousness in general' through Laas about 30 years ago, I have not lost sight of its development. One can... string almost the entire history of German philosophy of the last forty years along this thread." As Vaihinger's quote highlights, Laas sparked a renewed interest in his 1876 book *Kant's Analogies of Experience* by reutilizing the Kantian concept of "consciousness in general" for positivist epistemology. And the importance is clearly shown when Vaihinger further continues: "tell me how you stand regarding 'consciousness in general,' and I will tell you who you are, whether a representative of criticism or of dogmatism." Also compare the brief discussion of "consciousness in general" in Krauss (2023: 88, and 196 note 131).

<sup>133</sup> This distinguishes Laas' positivism from the stricter sensualism of J.S. Mill or E. Mach. Unlike both, who viewed concepts primarily as labels for sensory facts, Laas incorporates "ideal" objects alongside the sensory given. He argues, especially against Mill, that concepts such as logical functions (identity, negation), mathematical forms (the straight line), and even theoretical constructs like "consciousness in general," though perhaps originating from experience, attain a status not directly found within perception itself (KAE: 192). This allows Laas to uphold the rational necessity of mathematics and logic against extreme empiricism (IP3: 252ff, 670f).

<sup>134</sup> "We too accept the concept of an abstract, ideal or objective consciousness in general as the highest point of reference for this relation; and we too find it on our part, similarly to Kant, difficult to unfold from subjective and individual perceptions the structure of the objective world that stands in relation to this consciousness" (Laas IP3: 473). Compare Laas IP3: 50, 93, 139f, 255f, 262, 295 note 1, 305, 454, 487, 494f, 502, 601 note 1, 687; and KAE: 94ff, 106ff, 129 note 131.

To be sure, Laas insists on the status of “consciousness in general” as merely an “auxiliary representation” (*Hilfsvorstellung*).<sup>135</sup> Accordingly, it is not an ontological concept, meaning it is merely an indispensable conceptual and epistemological tool for coherent thought and scientific practice. For we must presuppose, Laas insists, a stable world independent of individual subjective perception to think rationally about “nature,”<sup>136</sup> and this is why science must operate within a common, lawful framework.<sup>137</sup> Only “consciousness in general” can establish this framework within the limits set by Laas’ correlativist epistemology. Its advantage lies in enabling the use of scientific concepts without endorsing a realist metaphysics of things-in-themselves, which in turn allows Laas’ empiricist epistemology to stay true to the “sensation-capable consciousness” demanded by his sensualism.

The payoff of this construction for scientific objectivity—that is, supplementation of possible perceptions followed by normalization, all framed for consciousness in general—is naturally further support for the correlativist separation of the objectively coherent from the subjectively coherent.<sup>138</sup> In particular, Laas crafts a definition of objectivity grounded not in correspondence to an external “reality-in-itself,” but in the factual coherence demonstrated by purely internal criteria in “pure experience.” This coherence, as shown, is judged by factors like perceptual consistency, predictability, causal links, and alignment with a normative standard

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<sup>135</sup> Laas IP3: 139. This designation as “auxiliary,” in fact, distinguishes Laas’ position from some proponents of “immanence philosophy.” In contrast to Schuppe (1894: 34), Laas does not claim that all reality is consciousness in a metaphysical sense like Schuppe does. Rather, Laas’ use of “consciousness in general” is solely epistemological and methodological, such that it can only serve to ground objective scientific discourse and guard against naive realism. It is not, that is, presented as the ultimate substance or container of being.

<sup>136</sup> Nature, of course, simply being another word for Laas’ “objective world.” “We call *nature* the epitome of actual and possible facts of consciousness that can be explained,” Laas declares, “and to the extent they can be explained, without regard to foresight of the future and emotional strivings, through subsumption under blind, so to speak mechanical laws; if we specifically designate as *external* nature the epitome of ‘objectively valid’ perceptions that are governed by mechanico-physical laws, but as *internal* nature the realm of blindly ruling psycho-mechanical laws and the involuntarily emerging phenomena of consciousness according to their predetermination: then countless billions of such animal beings have been engaged in laborious struggle with nature for immemorial times: with Nature ‘in them’ and ‘outside them’” (CI: 311f).

<sup>137</sup> Laas IP3: 75.

<sup>138</sup> Laas IP3: 26, 35, 47, 67f. — This commitment to a scientifically necessary distinction between objective actuality and subjective appearance further distinguishes Laas from other positivist contemporaries like Ernst Mach. While Mach sometimes treated different sensory presentations (like the visually bent and haptically straight stick in water) as practically equivalent sensations or “elements,” Laas’ correlativism insists on the scientific imperative to differentiate. The physicist, in other words, must treat the stick as objectively straight to maintain causal coherence and predictive accuracy within the scientific model of reality (the objective world), for this distinction is above all necessary for the “closed causal connection” science seeks to establish (IP3 80–81).

embodied by the “normal individual’s” ideal “consciousness in general,” the constant observer of normalized sensory experience.

Of course, Laas’ grounding of scientific intersubjective objectivity in an infinitely expandable web of possible and normalized perceptions for an ideal “consciousness in general” entails that, as he admits, science and philosophical epistemology constitute an “infinite task.”<sup>139</sup> Mapping this internal potential in the unfolding of the given according to scientific needs is the infinite work of science for the correlativist; and yet, Laas explains to the idealist and naïve realist, we should not “find the work of knowledge robbed of its proper seriousness and content due to the departure of transcendent objects of investigation.”<sup>140</sup>

In fact, Laas expresses joy—and believes we should too—at the endless, infinite, open path for human knowledge established by correlativism. When he every so often discusses the infinity of time, for instance, he states:

Excellent, this character of time for the mind researching in the realm of phenomena! From every moment reached, from every directly given, empirically real present. Such a mind sees an infinite perspective opening forward and backward. The awareness of an *infinite task* lifts and gives wings to its spirit. It need not fear in any way that it will ever run out of material for work.<sup>141</sup>

## §5.2. How the Correlativist Masters the Variability and Relativity of Perception

Granting Laas’ construction of the objective world as the represented product of the sum total of possible sensations under normative conditions conceived for “consciousness in general,” a question still remains for his positivism: How does science establish universal laws when specific sensory perceptions inevitably retain some variability and relativity? If the foundation lies in perception, and perception varies, doesn’t skepticism about scientific universality still threaten Laas? For the fluctuating character of individual perception—the very problem necessitating Laas’ construction of the objective world in the first place—still lingers even when dealing with the refined data science uses. How, then, are the universal and necessary laws secured for Laas’ sensualism?

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<sup>139</sup> “There is no need to depart from the positivist principles of Protagoras even where his own derivations are... transferred into *infinite tasks*” (Laas IP1: 274).

<sup>140</sup> IP3: 49.

<sup>141</sup> Laas KAE: 275. Compare Laas (1883: 240; IP3: 675, 688: “the tasks, which are set for empirical knowledge, themselves run into infinity”).

Laas' answer naturally hinges on understanding how science operates successfully within the objective world constructed for the correlated "consciousness in general." However, owing to the variability and relativity of phenomena and the limits of sensory perception within Laas' framework, it should first be noted that, according to Laas, scientists often have to deal with "approximations" or probabilities in their empirical descriptions.<sup>142</sup> Accordingly, Laas argues that the kind of absolute, apodictic certainty Kant associated with scientific explanations for the most part is, in practice, an unattainable ideal.

That said, Laas finds no inherent flaw in natural science merely because it operates with "approximations" rather than absolute certainty most of the time.<sup>143</sup> Science's strength instead lies in providing accurate explanations and reliable predictions relative to the standards of the positivist's "objective world." Given that the objective world of scientific reality is understood by Laas as a representational construct for "consciousness in general," not a direct mirroring of things-in-themselves, the epistemological goal for science must therefore shift from absolute correspondence to maximal coherence, consistency, and predictive power within that intersubjective, constructed domain.<sup>144</sup> "Provisionality" (*Vorläufigkeit*) and "continuous refinement towards perfection" (*Vervollkommnungsfähigkeit*) are, above all, the hallmarks of scientific strength, not signs of weakness. To prove this point, Laas illustrates how scientific practice successfully manages the inherent variability of perception despite its reliance on approximation.<sup>145</sup>

Consider, for instance, his analysis of how we come to scientifically measure time.

In order to attain accurate time measurements, we need to track duration using continuous, periodic, and uniform perceived movements found within our sensory experience.

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<sup>142</sup> "Science in the vast majority of its domains must be satisfied with the character of being approximate, of being capable of refinement towards perfection, indeed, science must be satisfied under certain conditions of being merely provisional" (Laas IP1: 82). Also compare IP1: 200f, 260; IP3: 24, and 488: "And science has learned to get by with approximations."

<sup>143</sup> Laas (IP1: 98f, §12) argues this belief or need that scientific knowledge must be apodictic and absolute stems from the idealist conviction that all science must resemble mathematics. Laas, in contrast, believes psychology has a closer connection to philosophy's epistemological goals than mathematics: "In truth mathematics has no more connection with the universal, principled and central aims of philosophy than any other detailed-science; some sciences—for example psychology—even have a much closer connection than mathematics does" (IP1: 245 note 2).

<sup>144</sup> For Laas, the "explanatory task" for human cognition grounded in this objective world involves four key challenges: (1) identifying lawful regularities within nature (understood as perceivable possibilities for "consciousness in general"), (2) pursuing mechanistic reductions of qualities to movements of basic matter, (3) mapping mind-body interactions, and (4) analyzing mental phenomena into their constituent parts and processes (IP3: 266f).

<sup>145</sup> Laas IP3: 22f.

Yet, Laas points out no perfectly uniform motion is directly given in experience: “even the rotation of the earth around its axis is demonstrably affected by the difference between the ebb and flow movements of the two halves of the earth.”<sup>146</sup> Nonetheless, he still believes that measures of time “approximately fixed and sufficient for all our purposes” remain achievable. This achievability stems from the fact that science acknowledges the imperfections in raw perceptual data and subsequently devises practical, normalizing solutions in sensory experience. Mean solar time, for instance, averages variations in the Sun’s apparent speed, creating the standard day our everyday lives revolve around by presupposing—as an idealization consistent with the structure of the correlativist’s objective world—a uniform movement not strictly observed. But of course, for the greater precision that drives science’s “needs,” sidereal time is rather preferred because it uses a more fixed stellar reference frame that offers a closer approximation to the ideal of absolute, uniform time, which functions as a necessary conceptual correspondent within the “objective world” conceived for Laas’ “consciousness in general.” Be that as it may, even sidereal time requires corrections due to variations in Earth’s actual rotation.<sup>147</sup> Hence, absolute precision in measuring time still remains an ideal for Laas.

These scientific methods, although reliant on approximation and idealization, nevertheless demonstrably suffice for both practical life and scientific rigor according to Laas’ sensualist epistemology.<sup>148</sup> They, so to speak, exemplify science working effectively within the objective world of possible sensations by striving towards ideal standards for a “pure represented-I,” i.e., “consciousness in general,” which makes the correlative reality we all share more comprehensible.

Bearing that in mind, for Laas, then, scientific knowledge is possible simply due to the given fact that we are an animal with a “sensation-capable consciousness,” progressing through an infinite process of refinement by observing discrepancies in perception, forming hypotheses, testing our predictions, and thereby discovering law-like patterns within the structured sensory perceptual data that eventually gain the rank of objectivity and universality.

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<sup>146</sup> Laas IP3: 23.

<sup>147</sup> Sidereal time is based on the Earth’s rotation relative to fixed stars (not the sun). A sidereal day is the time it takes for the Earth to complete one rotation relative to the vernal equinox, which is nearly four minutes shorter than a solar day. Sidereal time is particularly useful for astronomical observations because it directly relates to the positions of stars and galaxies in the sky. Astronomers can better predict when a star will be in the same position on a previous night by using sidereal time, making it more precise for this scientific purpose than solar time.

<sup>148</sup> Laas IP3: 25.



And for Laas, science is able to achieve such objective knowledge and universal laws “because the data of perception contains the possibility of doing so”:<sup>149</sup> because “nature does the preliminary work for us” (*Die Natur arbeitet uns vor*).<sup>150</sup>

## §6. Conclusion.

I have argued in this thesis that the positivism represented in Laas’ *Idealism and Positivism* should not be labelled subjectivist when understood through his theory of correlativism. Nevertheless, I must admit, due to the sheer volume and historical nature of Laas’ philosophical works, my account of his epistemology remains incomplete, and therefore open to potential objections. It is worth reflecting on this for a moment.

Since Laas affirms the subject’s necessity for knowledge not through *a priori* or transcendental principles but through the “stark facticity” of the “dualistically given,”<sup>151</sup> i.e., objective “sensation” and subjective “feeling,” he believes his positivism avoids the doctrine of the subjectivity of sensations. It should be clear, however, that Laas’ rejection of a transcendental reality and subject did not eliminate the subject’s role in his positivist epistemology. As I showed, Laas argued that the objective “world” is comprised as the sum total of possible sensations constructed for an ideal, hypothetical conscious subject, which is driven by scientific and practical needs. In this way, Laas’ objective world can only be a “mere representation”<sup>152</sup> and necessitates a correlated conscious subject to perceive it.

Due to the subject’s active role in utilizing the objective perceptual data given to it for knowledge-formation, Laas initially calls his theory of knowledge “subject-objectivism.” But since Laas admits that “such a complicated term” sounds “too baroque for” a theory that he believes is “so simple and natural,” he instead prefers to label it “more precisely” as “correlativism.”<sup>153</sup>

However, the reliance on the mere factual “coexistence” of subject and object may seem like a forced grounding for objectivity. That is, Laas’ argument that simply observing this correlation points to “inner differences” among the facts of experience offers no deeper

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<sup>149</sup> Laas IP3: 33.

<sup>150</sup> Laas IP3: 15.

<sup>151</sup> Laas IP3: 139.

<sup>152</sup> Laas IP3: 53.

<sup>153</sup> Laas IP3: 182.

justification for why this duality must hold, or why one “pole” reliably represents an objective reality beyond its relation to the subject. If Laas maintains that all perceived objects, including those deemed objective, are fundamentally “objects of consciousness”; and if consciousness itself is inherently subjective; then grounding objective reality solely within consciousness potentially leads to subjectivism to the extent that it makes the existence of an external world dependent upon subjective awareness. If this is the case, Laas’ positivism, it could be argued, still struggles to convincingly escape the charge that the purportedly objective content remains fundamentally conditioned by, and perhaps reducible to, subjective sensation. Laas’ epistemological project in *Idealism and Positivism*, therefore, would be a complete and utter failure.

While potential subjectivist objections to Laas’ positivism warrant extensive analysis, addressing them comprehensively requires investigating aspects of his thought that extend beyond the scope of this thesis. Certainly a more thorough account of Laas’ correlativism and sensualism, particularly regarding objectivity, would, for instance, have to flesh out a more robust understanding of (1) his notion of consciousness in light of 19<sup>th</sup> century physiology (especially his concept of the “I”), (2) his “positivist ontology” and metaphysics,<sup>154</sup> along with (3) Laas’ account of “judgement,” “truth,” and “objective validity.”<sup>155</sup> But wherever the final solution resides, since there has been so little research on Laas in general since World War II, my aim in this thesis is merely to lay a more accurate groundwork for understanding Laas’ epistemological project in *Idealism and Positivism* than has previously been available in English. Accordingly, I could not provide a complete account of Laas’ correlativist epistemology, namely one that would provide a defence against all subjectivist readings, nor did I set myself this task.

That said, whatever research may come in the future, I want to conclude with the suggestion that, at the very least, acknowledging these epistemological problems is necessary for understanding Laas’ specific place within early German positivism. To repeat what I said in the

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<sup>154</sup> A thorough account of Laas’ “I” must engage in a thorough reading of his essay “The Causality of the I,” which this thesis primarily kept to the sidelines unless it illuminated the sensualist arguments in *Idealism and Positivism*. “Positivist ontology” is discussed in more detail by Laas in §9 of the third volume of *Idealism and Positivism*. However, since this thesis only focuses on the epistemological implications of correlativism as a response to subjectivism, I could not discuss many important ontological consequences of Laas’ correlativism, and the further auxiliary concepts therefrom, in an exhaustive manner due to space constraints.

<sup>155</sup> It is worth noting that correlativism must be distinguished from Laas’ theory of truth. It is certainly an epistemological doctrine, but truth concerns judgment validity—what Laas, following neo-Kantians, terms *Erkenntniskritik* (“critique of knowledge”). Correlativism rather belongs to *Erkenntnistheorie*, a “theory of cognition” or a “phenomenology of the mind.” Compare IP3: 674f; IP1: 229.

introduction, the early German positivists, page after page, resisted the subjectivist assertion advanced against their epistemology. Yet, unlike Mach or Avenarius, whose empirico-criticism, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, pursued a neutral monism that aimed to dissolve the subject-object distinction,<sup>156</sup> Laas' correlativism explicitly retained subject-object duality as necessary for scientific cognition, albeit refashioned by the standards of 19<sup>th</sup> century physiology.<sup>157</sup> In this respect, studying Laas' correlativism can only illuminate the variety of strategies employed by empiricist and psychologistic thinkers in the 1870s–1890s to secure objective knowledge against the backdrop of the so-called “great dispute” between the transcendental and psychogenetic methods. And within this dispute, Laas' *Idealism and Positivism* deserves our attention: it represents the first, and perhaps, foremost attempt by a German philosopher to navigate and avoid the pitfalls of idealism, reductive empiricism, and naïve realism in the name of a “critical”<sup>158</sup> positivism.

Therefore, even if potential difficulties remain within Laas' epistemology that call for further investigation, my basic contention still stands: correlativism was Laas' proposed foundation for scientific objectivity, built on a sensualist-empiricist epistemology. Any future interpretations, especially those maintaining a subjectivist reading, must take up their arms directly against this contention. For, as Laas affirms, “under no circumstances should empiricism end in science-hostile skepticism.”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> See for example, Edgar (2013: 112ff), Banks (2014: 30ff), Krauss (2019: 21f), Patton (2021: 142ff), and Beiser (2024: 151ff). See also Preston (2021: 1ff) for a brief overview of the history of Mach interpretation, which initially started with subjectivist readings, but then gradually transitioned to more intricate non-subjectivist readings—akin, of course, to my goal in this thesis of laying the groundwork for a similar transition with Laas' positivism.

<sup>157</sup> I would like to point out the Laas of *Kant's Analogies* did not see much value in neutral monism. He says, following a discussion of A. Bain's psychology: “Occasionally in this camp one finds the attempt to bring the mysterious duality closer to understanding by positing something ‘neutral’ as the foundation, which only appears in a dual mode of appearance, somewhat like how the same ether vibrations *appear* as light to the *eye* and as heat to the *sense of touch*. Obviously, however, this comparison is severely flawed. For where, outside the ‘neutral’ reality, is the ‘eye,’ where is the ‘sense of touch,’ to which the indifference of mind-body *appears* once as consciousness, once as (not perceived, but transcendent) body?” (KAE: 344f note 426). Note, then, that Laas' stress on the dual nature of experience for scientific epistemology contradicts Beiser's (2024: 2) claim that all the early German positivists opposed dualism in “support for scientific monism.” Beiser (2024: 80), however, also notes Laas was not a neutral monist; but what kind of monist is he then? A monistic sensualist? Beiser's thought here is never fully fleshed out.

<sup>158</sup> A “critical philosophy” for Laas is that which “like all science, wishes to practice the ‘art of not-knowing’ [*ars nesciendi*] at the right place” (IP3: 687).

<sup>159</sup> Laas IP3: 7.

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