If the title of a paper advertises that the author aims to provide a deviant interpretation of one aspect of the position of an important figure in a discipline – here Karl Mannheim – the first question of the reader is, or should be: “What, then, is the standard interpretation?” In preparing this paper, I noticed that it is far from easy to give a comprehensive answer to this first question without discussing some of the historical background of the discussion of relativism in the sociology of knowledge. It is only from this background that it is possible to notice why Mannheim’s contribution was unique and led to the first vigorous attacks on the epistemological and especially relativistic implications of the sociology of knowledge. Furthermore, it is only with a rough understanding of Mannheim’s position in the history of sociology of knowledge that it is possible to see why the idea of my paper – to understand Mannheim’s attitude towards the sociological investigation of the natural sciences – is interesting in any case. Therefore, I will start with a very short historical sketch of the discussion at the beginning of the last century and of the expansion of it since that time. Setting Mannheim’s contribution in context, we can then have a look on the interpretation of his stance on relativism. I will not concentrate on Mannheim’s attempt to reject the reproach to hold a form of self-defeating relativism and to establish an acceptable form of – what he calls – relationism. My specific interest will be in Mannheim’s position towards knowledge in the natural sciences.
and mathematics – as Mannheim himself calls them ‘the exact sciences’.¹ I will try to get some order in the interpretations such that it is easier to see which one to reject, which one to attenuate and which one to accept. Finally, I will show that most interpretations by friend and foe are, at best, misleading and some are astonishingly misguided. This will be done by trying to understand Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge in the context of the intellectual background at his time with categories and concepts of current theoretical philosophy in the analytic tradition. This approach is unorthodox but, I hope, will prove fruitful.

Before I will start with my interpretation, however, I want to emphasize the restricted scope of my argument. It has to be noticed that this paper is interpretative and – as it should be – it is a charitable interpretation I am aiming at. If at points it seems as if I am defending Mannheim’s position of relativism or relationism, be sure that this is a wrong impression. My own position concerning the relativism debate in the sociology of knowledge can be summarized in the following way: First of all, I think that alethic relativism – that is relativism about truth – is not really at issue in the relativism debate in the sociology of knowledge. What is at stake is epistemic relativism – that is relativism about justification. The latter does not necessarily imply the former. Secondly, I think that epistemic relativism in the sociology of knowledge – recall, relativism regarding justification, not necessarily also relativism about truth – can be traced back generally to two ideas. The first is a basically Kantian thought concerning the epistemic inaccessibility of the world-in-itself. You can find this idea, I believe, in such supposedly distinct approaches like Mannheim’s, Thomas Kuhn’s and also the Strong Programme’s. The second is an argument that has been called ‘argument from norm-circularity’ by Paul Boghossian and which roughly consists of Agrippa’s trilemma with an additional premise that includes an incommensurability thesis. Since I do not think that the world-in-itself is epistemically inaccessible and also do not think that an incommensurability thesis that would be required in the argument from norm-circularity can be sustained, it follows that I do not see how epistemic relativism can be defended. Furthermore, I do not

¹ From now on I will restrict my analysis just to the natural sciences and will not discuss mathematics. It is an interesting, interpretative question whether Mannheim sees any difference between these areas of thought, but I will not dwell on this issue.
see how relativism concerning justification can escape pragmatic – not logical – self-refutation. However, simply forget about all that – just have in my mind that my charitable interpretation does not coincide with my own position.

Let us start then with setting Mannheim in historical context.

Mannheim in the Historical Context of the Sociology of Knowledge

Taking a historical stance towards the question of relativism in the sociology of knowledge demands discussion especially of German sociology of knowledge at the beginning of the last century – though, undeniably, a comprehensive historical introduction would require to mention such important predecessors as Francis Bacon, Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim to name just a few. In order to understand Mannheim’s contribution and, especially, the strong opposition to his sociology of knowledge take the following quote from Ludwig Gumplowicz, one of the founding fathers of sociology, taken from his Grundriß der Soziologie:

The major error of individualistic psychology is that the person thinks. From this error results the eternal quest after the source of thinking inside of the individual […] . This is a chain of errors. Since, first of all, it is not the person but its social community that is thinking. The source of thinking does not lie inside of the person but in the social environment, the person is living in, in the social atmosphere, in which it is breathing and it cannot think differently from the way it results with necessity from the influences of the social environment that concentrate in his brain.²

Notice, that Gumplowicz emphasizes that the source of individual thinking lies in the social environment of the individual. The individual cannot think differently, since it is located in and influenced by the community it is living in. Importantly, Gumplowicz does not say explicitly whether it is just the way the individual thinks that is influenced by the social environment or whether the source also of the contents and validity of knowledge of individual thinking is the society. The question of much epistemological ado about the sociology of knowledge is exactly this: How far is knowledge and thinking influenced or determined by social factors and, respectively, what exactly is the potential area of investigation of sociological investigations?

² Gumplowicz 1905, p. 268 (my translation).
One of the founding fathers of the sociology of knowledge, Max Scheler, answers this question by distinguishing between so-called ideal factors (Idealfaktoren) and real factors (Realfaktoren). The real factors are, for example, political and economical circumstances; roughly what we can regard as ‘social structure’. The ideal factors are values and ideas, for example as we find in religion or in science. Scheler believes that the main task of the sociology of knowledge is to investigate the relations between these two realms of factors. Though both realms of factors are, according to Scheler, causally independent of each other the ideal factors need to be realized by the real factors. The ideal factors, themselves, have no social force; the real factors determine which of the ideas and values is in fact realized in a historical situation. The sociology of knowledge is thus confined to investigate these processes and not the ideas and values themselves. This becomes clear in a much quoted statement by Scheler. He thinks quite in accord with Gumplowicz that the “sociological character of all knowledge, of all forms of thought, intuition and cognition is unquestionable”. However, he goes on to clarify that “although the content and even less the objective validity of all knowledge is not determined by the controlling perspectives of social interests, nevertheless this is the case with the selection of the objects of knowledge.” For Scheler, the content and validity of knowledge are out of reach of the investigation by the sociology of knowledge. How the contents are selected to become the objects of knowledge is the proper area of sociological research.

With this thought of Scheler in mind we can come to the position of Karl Mannheim. Also Mannheim clearly attacks the dominance of an individualistic bias in epistemology and approves the generally social character of knowledge in quite the same manner as Gumplowicz and Scheler. In the introduction to his Ideology and Utopia he claims:

We will not succeed in attaining an adequate psychology and theory of knowledge as a whole as long as our epistemology fails, from the very beginning, to recognize the social character of knowing, and fails to regard individualized thinking only as an exceptional instance.

5 Mannheim 1946, p. 29.
However, though Mannheim and Scheler share the conviction of the general social character of knowledge, Mannheim rejects Scheler’s clear separation of ideal and real factors. For Mannheim, the relation of values (ideal factors) and social structure (real factors) is dynamic:

In one word, as soon as we abandon the platonizing conception, the phenomenological difference of the real and ideal factors will be subordinated to the genetic unity of the historic process, and we shall advance to the point of origin where a real factor is converted into a mental datum.

Whereas Scheler could exempt the contents and the validity of knowledge from sociological investigations, since the sociological question just concerned how the ideal factors are realized, Mannheim thinks that the real and ideal factors are part of a historical and genetical process that can be investigated from the sociological point of view. Therefore, for Mannheim the area of investigation of the sociology of knowledge also comprises the contents and the validity of this very knowledge.

We see now, why the question of relativism in the sociology of knowledge becomes urgent with respect to Mannheim’s programme: Whereas Scheler’s ideal factors are not influenced by the real factors, Mannheim cannot separate strictly between the genesis of a belief and its validity – no wonder that he aims at a “revision of the thesis that the genesis of a proposition is under all circumstances irrelevant to its validity.” He does, however, try to circumvent a “relativism in the sense of one assertion being as good as another.” Mannheim’s attempt to do so is complex and it would take another paper to explain it fully. Nevertheless, the basic idea is that the view Mannheim calls relationism just “states that every assertion can only be relationally formulated” According to Mannheim, this view becomes relativism only when judged on the background of an “older static ideal of eternal, unperspectivistic truths independent of the subjective experience of the observer”.

---

7 Mannheim 1952 a, p. 162.
8 Mannheim 1946, pp. 262 f. (improved translation).
9 Mannheim 1946, p. 270.
10 Mannheim 1946, p. 270.
is – as he says more than once – the revision of traditional epistemology and he believes that, once we judge his theoretical approach in the light of such a revised epistemology, there will be no problem of relativism anymore. I will not comment extensively on this attempt to solve the problem of relativism. However, it has to be noted that Mannheim’s attempt at points appears to have the following, rather trivial structure: There will be no problem with relativism once you accept relativistic epistemology. Such a truism, of course, provides no argument to accept a relativistic epistemology in the first place and can be maintained for virtually any position – including absolutism – on analogous lines. Let us, however, not dwell on Mannheim’s proposed solution.

We have seen that Mannheim expands the area of investigation of the sociology of knowledge. It is requested to do research in all those areas in which we can find, as he calls it, ‘existential determination of knowledge and thought’ (Seinsverbundenheit/Seinsgebundenheit des Wissens und Denkens). And Mannheim gives us criteria for these areas that clearly express his expansion of the potential realm of investigation of the sociology of knowledge:

The existential determination of thought may be regarded as a demonstrated fact in those realms of thought in which we can show (a) that the process of knowing does not as a matter of fact develop historically in accordance with immanent laws, that it does not follow only from the ‘nature of things’ or from ‘pure logical possibilities’, and that it is not driven by an ‘inner dialectic’. On the contrary, the emergence and the crystallization of actual thought is influenced in many decisive points by extra-theoretical factors of the most diverse sort that may be called ‘existential factors’. This existential determination of thought will also have to be regarded as a fact (b) if the influence of these existential factors on the concrete content of knowledge is of more than mere peripheral importance, if they are relevant not only to the genesis of ideas, but penetrate into their subject matter and form, their content and formulation [...].

Mannheim’s expansion of the potential area of sociological investigation to the contents and the validity of knowledge does, however, not
cover all branches of knowledge and it is at this point, where we come to the topic of my paper. It is undeniable that Mannheim exempts the contents of the natural sciences and mathematics from his thesis of the existential determination of thought. He says:

In assertions of this latter sort [i.e. in the humanities, M.S.], we may speak of an ‘infiltration of the social position’ of the investigator into the results of his study and of the ‘existential-relativity’, i.e. the relationship of these assertions to the underlying ‘existence’. And we will contrast these assertions with those, which (like in the case of the assertion $2 	imes 2 = 4$ just mentioned) do not contain such an infiltration of the social position of the investigator – at least not in a for us transparent way – into the assertion.\textsuperscript{16}

Mannheim, therefore expands, the area of investigation of the sociology of knowledge to the contents and validity of knowledge, he flinches, however, from sociological investigations of the contents and validity of all areas of knowledge. Before I will go on to show how Mannheim’s reservation concerning knowledge in the natural sciences has been interpreted, let me end with my short historical overview by considering one more recent position.

Having a look on the so-called ‘Strong Programme’, especially popular by the writings of Barry Barnes and David Bloor, we can see a further expansion of the area of sociological investigations. Let us start with the very first sentences of David Bloor’s much discussed book Knowledge and Social Imagery:

Can the sociology of knowledge investigate and explain the very content and nature of scientific knowledge? Many sociologists believe that it cannot. They say that knowledge as such, as distinct from the circumstances surrounding its production, is beyond their grasp. They voluntarily limit the scope of their own enquiries. I shall argue that this is a betrayal of their disciplinary standpoint.\textsuperscript{17}

The italicized parts point to the problem Mannheim had, according to the Strong Programme: Though Mannheim investigates the contents of some knowledge, he hesitates to examine the contents of scientific knowl-

\textsuperscript{16} Mannheim 1946, p. 244 (improved translation), cf. also Mannheim 1952b, p. 193.
\textsuperscript{17} Bloor 1991, p. 7 (italics added).
And the ‘Strong Programme’ is supposed to emancipate itself from Mannheim’s and other traditional sociologists’ restriction of scope by trying to show that the answer to the question posed by Bloor must be an unrestricted ‘YES’. Thus, the impartiality and symmetry requirement of the programme can be read as an expression of demarcation from traditional sociology of knowledge, notably Mannheimian: Whilst Mannheim confined the explanatory task of the sociology of knowledge to a special class of beliefs, the Strong Programme seeks to explain true and false, scientific and unscientific, rationally and irrationally held beliefs by the same types of cause. As will be shown in turn, the Strong Programme’s demarcation from Mannheimian sociology of knowledge depends on a specific interpretation of his position concerning knowledge in the natural sciences.

Let us see, then, how Mannheim’s position is usually interpreted.

The Standard Interpretation(s) of Mannheim with Respect to Knowledge in the Natural Sciences

It is undeniable and clear from the quote above that Mannheim makes some exemption concerning the natural sciences. However, the interpretations of Mannheim at this point differ with regard to two questions. The first question is: What exactly is exempted from sociological analysis with regard to the natural sciences? The second question is: Why does Mannheim exempt whatever is exempted from his sociological analyses?

With respect to the first question nobody denies that Mannheim forecloses the contents of the areas in question from sociological analyses. Some interprets, however, appear to go further. Take, for example, some of the claims by proponents of the Strong Programme. Barry Barnes in his monograph Scientific Knowledge and Sociological Theory indicates that “Mannheim, it will be remembered, accepted that mathematics and

---

18 It goes without saying that Mannheim is not the only one criticized by the proponents of the Strong Programme for limiting the scope of sociological investigations. Thus, Bloor claims: “Like Karl Mannheim before him, and many others since, Merton felt that sociological enquiry into the nature of knowledge was bound to be of a limited character.” (Bloor 2004, p. 82). Cf. also Barnes/Dolby 1970.

the natural sciences lay beyond the scope of his theories"\textsuperscript{20} and in a paper written with David Bloor declares that Mannheim “exempted the physical sciences and mathematics from his sociology of knowledge”\textsuperscript{21}. Note that these statements are ambiguous between the well-documented fact that Mannheim exempted the contents of the natural sciences from his thesis of existential determination and the more demanding thesis that Mannheim believes that the sociology of knowledge has nothing to say about the structure, methodology and the history of the natural sciences at all. The latter interpretation is suggested also by other authors. Thus Peter Farago believes that “according to Mannheim, there is no place for the sociology of knowledge in the history of exact sciences”\textsuperscript{22}. And Frederic Vandenberghe is convinced that “Mannheim explicitly exempted [the exact sciences] from the purview of his sociology.”\textsuperscript{23} The interpretation to the effect that Mannheim exempted the natural sciences completely from being within the scope of sociological analyses is not unique to authors who are sympathetic to relativist thought. Thus, in contrasting Mannheim and the Strong Programme, Robert Nola, a distinguished critique of both approaches in the sociology of knowledge, claims that “[all] of mathematics and science is to be included within the scope of [the Strong Programme] while they are excluded from the scope of Mannheim’s [sociology of knowledge].”\textsuperscript{24} We can therefore give two different interpretative answers to the first question as to what exactly is exempted in Mannheim’s approach with regard to the natural sciences: The modest interpretation consists in accepting that Mannheim precludes the sociology of knowledge from analysing the contents of the natural sciences. According to a more ambitious interpretation Mannheim exempts the natural sciences from the purview of the sociology of knowledge. I will show that only the modest interpretation can be correct. In fact, as will turn out, Mannheim himself at points analyses what he calls ‘the paradigm of thought of the exact-natural sciences’\textsuperscript{25} by relating it to a specific historical and social situation.

\textsuperscript{20} Barnes 1974, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{22} Farago 2002, p. 182.
\textsuperscript{23} Vandenberghe 1999, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{24} Nola 2003, pp. 198 f., cf. also Goldman 1986, pp. 303 f.
\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Mannheim 1946, p. 261.
What about the second question concerning the interpretation of Mannheim’s exemption? Mannheim surely exempts the contents of the natural sciences but what are the reasons for this restriction of scope of sociological analyses? I think it is possible to find three different interpretations of Mannheim’s restriction. As I hope to show in turn: In effect, all these do not get Mannheim right.

The first, and probably most prominent interpretation, is what I will call ‘the failure-of-nerve-thesis’. This thesis plays an important role in the argumentation and foundation of the Strong Programme, especially in the texts of David Bloor. We find the thesis in the following passage from Bloor’s *Knowledge and Social Imagery*: “Despite [Mannheim’s] determination to set up causal and symmetrical canons of explanation, his nerve failed him when it came to such apparently autonomous subjects as mathematics and natural science.”

According to Bloor, the failure of nerve is not just restricted to Mannheim – it is the explanation for the ‘weak programmer’s’ reluctance to expand the disciplinary scope of the sociology of knowledge: “The cause of the hesitation to bring science within the scope of a thorough-going sociological scrutiny is lack of nerve and will. It is believed to be a foredoomed enterprise.” Bloor does not think that such a psychological explanation itself is sufficient to account for the traditional sociologist’s hesitation. However, according to Bloor, the reluctance expresses itself in the sociologist starting an “a priori and philosophical argumentation”. The interpretation at issue thus consists in the claim that Mannheim exempted the contents of knowledge in the natural sciences from sociological investigation because his nerve failed him and that he stops to argue *sociologically* and *based on empirical fact* – the reproach is that Mannheim stops to argue scientifically and indulges oneself in philosophical speculations. In Bloor’s contrasting picture, the aim of the Strong Programme is to argue thoroughly sociologically – it is supposed to be a naturalistic and scientific programme. It is thus no exaggeration to claim that the failure-of-nerve-thesis stands in the centre of the argumentation of why the Strong Programme should be regarded

---

29 Cf. also Barnes 1974, p. 147 f.
strong: Whereas the weak programmers at points lose nerves and adhere to philosophical argumentation, the Strong Programmers stand out with nerves of sociological steel.

The second interpretation can also be found in the writings of a Strong Programmer, namely Barry Barnes. At the beginning of his monograph *Interests and the Growth of Knowledge* Barnes distinguishes between a ‘contemplative account’ and – what can be called – a ‘sociological account’ of knowledge. Though the distinction of both accounts is much more complex, part of it consists in the same idea we already came across in the quotes from Gumpowicz, Scheler and Mannheim: Whilst the contemplative account “describes knowledge as the product of isolated individuals”, on the sociological account “knowledge is treated as essentially social”.

Barnes thinks that in the history of sociology of knowledge “individual writers rarely situat[e] themselves consistently and unambiguously on one side or the other” and Karl Mannheim stands up as a witness for Barnes’ case:

> But, although these points [bespeaking for the sociological account, M.S.] are reasserted a number of times throughout the work, a great part of its argument and much of its concrete discussion is, in fact, predicated upon the contemplative model. Natural science and mathematics, Mannheim tells us, are forms of knowledge which bear no mark of the context of their production and which can properly be assessed entirely in terms of their correspondence with reality. Moreover, precisely because they are the products of disinterested contemplation, they are preferable to other kinds of knowledge, to sociology or history or political thought.

This interpretation goes further than Bloor’s: Like Bloor, Barnes assumes that behind Mannheim’s exemption of the contents of knowledge in the natural sciences stands a non-sociological, philosophical model (‘the contemplative account’). However, Barnes also thinks that Mannheim for this reason *evaluates* the knowledge in the different areas of knowledge differently. As is clear from the quote, Barnes believes that Mannheim thinks that knowledge in the natural sciences is preferable or better than knowledge in other branches of inquiry. The same thesis can also be found in the interpretation of the sociologist Bernd Schofer. He thinks that, for Mannheim, natural-scientific knowledge has “an episte-
mological privileged status”32 Thus, the second interpretation consists in the claim that Mannheim believes in the preferability and epistemological privilege of knowledge in the natural sciences.

The third interpretation is closely connected to the former ones, it is better, however, to keep them separated. Whilst the first interpretation alludes to Mannheim’s supposed failure of nerve and the second to a different evaluation of the knowledge in different areas of thought, the third interpretation maintains that Mannheim exempts the contents of knowledge in the natural sciences since the contents themselves in principle are such that they cannot be examined by sociological investigations. Recall the quote from Mannheim on the criteria for the areas in which to find ‘existential determination’: Those areas are exempted that “as a matter of fact develop historically in accordance with immanent laws, that […] follow only from the ‘nature of things’ or from ‘pure logical possibilities’, and that [are] driven by an ‘inner dialectic’.”33 According to the third interpretation, Mannheim thinks that the very objects of knowledge in the areas of natural science and mathematics are such that the development of these areas is largely predictable. Thus, the distinction between knowledge in the ‘exact sciences’ and knowledge in areas of ‘existentially determined thought’ is not contingent – rather Mannheim believes that the very ‘nature’ of the objects of knowledge in these distinct areas is such that the results and contents of the natural sciences cannot be in focus of the sociology of knowledge in principle. We can find this interpretation again in the writings of Barnes and Bloor:

Even the sociologist Karl Mannheim adopted this dualist and rationalist view when he contrasted the ‘existential determination of thought’ by ‘extra-theoretical factors’ with development according to ‘immanent laws’ derived from the ‘nature of things’ of ‘pure logical possibilities’. This is why he exempted the physical sciences and mathematics from his sociology of knowledge.34

Furthermore, also Bernd Schofer thinks that Mannheim in restricting the scope of sociological investigations reacts on the different “objects of knowledge”35 in the different areas: According to Schofer, Mannheim appeals to a “foundationalist interpretation of knowledge in the natu-

33 Mannheim 1946, p. 240.
35 Schofer 1999, p. 44 (my translation).
ral sciences”\textsuperscript{36} and pleads for the absolute character of this knowledge whereas he treats the knowledge in the areas of existentially determined thought to be of a fundamentally different kind. The reason for this strict distinction of areas of inquiry is, according to Schofer, that Mannheim believes that it is simply adequate to the very objects of inquiry.\textsuperscript{37} The distinction of the different areas of thought, thus, cannot be contingent. The idea of this interpretation is summarized in the following statement of Henk Woldring:

Why does [Mannheim] keep the natural sciences outside of the social determiners of consciousness? Indeed, there are certain differences between the determining in the social and the natural sciences, but Mannheim makes that distinction absolute and comes to a division of human consciousness in two parts.\textsuperscript{38}

The third interpretation, therefore, consists in the claim that Mannheim exempted the contents of knowledge in the natural sciences since he believes that knowledge in these areas is as a matter of principle of a fundamentally different kind than knowledge in the areas of existentially determined thought. The distinction between these areas is not contingent.

I think that these three interpretations are not exclusive: In several ways they are connected to each other and it is possible for an interpreter to think that all three interpretations are correct. Let us see whether the interpretations in fact are appropriate.

**The Shortcomings of the Standard Interpretation(s)**

As I admitted, it is futile to deny that Mannheim exempts the contents of the natural sciences and mathematics from his thesis of the existential determination of thought. Recall the following quote:

In assertions of this latter sort [i.e. in the humanities, M.S.], we may speak of an ‘infiltration of the social position’ of the investigator into the results of his study and of the ‘existential-relativity’, i.e. the relationship of these assertions to the underlying ‘existence’. And we will contrast these assertions with those, which (like in the case

\textsuperscript{36} Schofer 1999, p. 45 (my translation).
\textsuperscript{37} Cf. Schofer 1999, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{38} Woldring 1987, p. 165.
of the assertion $2 \times 2 = 4$ just mentioned) do not contain such an infiltration of the social position of the investigator – at least not in a for us transparent way – into the assertion.\textsuperscript{39}

Clear as this statement of the exemption of the contents of mathematics (and the natural sciences)\textsuperscript{40} from the thesis of the existential determination of knowledge might be, it is often remarked by interpreters that Mannheim appears to be ambivalent on this issue.\textsuperscript{41} For example, Mannheim also claims

that in the quantum theory, for instance, where we are dealing with the measurement of electrons, it is impossible to speak of a result of measurement which can be formulated independently of the measuring instrument used [because] the measuring instrument […] itself relevantly influences the position and the velocity of the electrons to be measured.\textsuperscript{42}

And he concludes that

[if] we followed this trend of thought, which in its unformulated relationism is surprisingly similar to our own, then the setting-up of the logical postulate that a sphere of ‘truth in itself’ exists and has validity seems as difficult to justify as all of the other empty existential dualisms just mentioned.\textsuperscript{43}

Let us not quarrel with whether Mannheim’s assessment of the ‘un-

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{39} Mannheim 1946, p. 244 (improved translation), cf. also Mannheim 1952 c, pp. 35 f., 44, Mannheim 1952 d, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{40} Cf. for explicit statements of the exemption of the contents of the natural sciences: Mannheim 1952 a, p. 135, Mannheim 1952 b, pp. 193 f.
\textsuperscript{42} Mannheim 1946, pp. 274 f.
\textsuperscript{43} Mannheim 1946, p. 275. With respect to this quote, Martin Endreß pointed out to me that there has been a development in Mannheim’s position concerning the exemption of the contents of the natural sciences from sociological analyses (see his contribution in this volume and personal conversation). On the one hand, I totally agree with Endreß and, as will turn out, a development in Mannheim’s attitude towards the natural sciences is no surprise from the point of view of my interpretation: Mannheim’s outlook includes that it is adequate also to investigate the contents of the natural sciences by sociological means in case they demand it, and his 1931 reference to quantum theory might lay testimony to the fact that he thought then that the natural sciences demand it. On the other hand, I do not think that there has been a change in Mannheim’s general philosophical outlook concerning this question. Since I will present testimony for my interpretation from his early as well as late work I think that the reason for the development in Mannheim’s attitude is due to a change in his view of the natural sciences from the same general philosophical and sociological point of view as in his early writing.
\end{footnotesize}
formulated relationism’ in quantum theory is correct.\textsuperscript{44} What is decisive for the task of interpreting Mannheim is that the statement points to an ambivalence in Mannheim’s position: On the one hand, Mannheim clearly restricts his “thesis of the inherently relational structure of human cognition”\textsuperscript{45} to the humanities and the social sciences, on the other hand he sees a trend of thought with an ‘unformulated relationism’ in theories in the natural sciences. At this point the question emerges immediately how to explain this ambivalence. The answer to this question will show that Mannheim’s position in one sense is anti-naturalistic and in another sense is naturalistic.\textsuperscript{46} And this fact will cast light on Mannheim’s general epistemological outlook and his handling of the issue of relativism. Furthermore, it will clarify Mannheim’s position on knowledge in the natural sciences and mathematics.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} Surely, it has to be pointed out that Mannheim’s claim that in quantum theory we find an ‘unformulated relationism’ that is supposed to make it difficult to justify ‘a postulate of the existence of a sphere of truth in itself’ needs a lot of further explanation on Mannheim’s part. Depending on what exactly is meant by ‘relationism’ in this context it risks to be either trivial or simply false (cf. for an early criticism: Hinshaw 1943, pp. 65 f.). For the present purpose of showing that Mannheim does not exempt the contents of the natural sciences in principle of sociological investigations, it is, however, not necessary to make an attempt at understanding Mannheim’s elliptical claim.

\textsuperscript{45} Mannheim 1946, p. 269 (improved translation).

\textsuperscript{46} Distinguishing between anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic doctrines in this context demands a short note on the differences between the distinction here and the distinction as it is used in Popper’s book “The Poverty of Historicism”. Popper also distinguishes between anti- and pro-naturalistic doctrines in historicism and, notably, in the work of Mannheim (cf. Popper 2002). Part of Popper’s description of the anti-naturalistic doctrines comes close to the one that I am going to use in the following: “It is the doctrine that the proper method of the social sciences, as opposed to the method of the natural sciences, is based upon an intimate understanding of social phenomena” (Popper 2002, p. 17). However, his description of the pro-naturalistic doctrine is different from the one that concerns me. As for the pro-naturalistic doctrines, Popper identifies in historicist methodology “a strangely […] sociological theory – the theory that society will necessarily change but along a predetermined path that cannot change, through stages predetermined by inexorable necessity” (Popper 2002, p. 46). Whether or not Mannheim believes in deterministic, historical laws of social development is of no concern for my description of his pro-naturalistic thesis.

\textsuperscript{47} In this way, my interpretation is following recent trends. Cf. the remark of Zammito 2007, pp. 802 f.: “Recent research suggests that Bloor never fully realized the particular contextual and conceptual concerns which animated Mannheim’s original form of the sociology of knowledge, and consequently misunderstood Mannheim’s attitude toward natural science and mathematics”.

Unauthenticated
Historicism and Mannheim’s Anti-Naturalism

Mannheim undeniably stands in a historicist tradition of distinguishing between the methods of the so-called Naturwissenschaften (natural sciences) and Geisteswissenschaften (humanities) by defending a distinctive method of understanding (Verstehen) against a method of explanation (Erklären).Just recall Wilhelm Dilthey’s famous dictum „Die Natur erklären wir, das Seelenleben verstehen wir“. In this sense, Mannheim’s position is thoroughly anti-naturalistic: He denies that there is only one ultimate kind of method in the sciences, namely the explanatory method that manifests itself paradigmatically in the natural sciences. He speaks of “abandoning the natural-scientific way” and “treading the path of interpretative psychology”. Therefore, the humanities must emancipate [themselves] completely from the hegemony of the methodological principles of natural science; for in the natural sciences, where problems of this kind are necessarily lacking, we encounter nothing even faintly analogous to the thought patterns with which we have to deal at every step in the cultural sciences. The natural sciences need one sort of thought pattern, the humanities need another one. The difference in thought patterns is made clear, so Mannheim believes, by a distinction of what he calls static and dynamic thinking: Whilst the thought pattern of the natural sciences is supposed to be static, in the humanities we need to establish a thought pattern of dynamic thinking. This also has consequences for the kind of knowledge and progress in the different sciences: In the natural sciences, the development is supposed to be ‘linear’ and “it is possible to accumulate knowledge and discover truths […] without reference to the historical

49 Dilthey 1924, p. 144.
50 Cf. Mannheim 1982, pp. 75 f., 185: “[One] of the unjustified assumptions of every natural-scientific conception of thinking consists of hypostasizing one form of knowledge as knowledge per se”, cf. also Mannheim 1946, pp. 150 f. It is this position that Mannheim himself calls ‘naturalism’ and criticizes thoroughly. Mannheim’s criticism of naturalism is influenced especially by Troeltsch. Cf. also Simonds 1978, pp. 36 ff.
51 Mannheim 1982, p. 76.
52 Mannheim 1952 c, p. 37 (improved translation), cf. also Mannheim 1952 c, pp. 70 f., 82.
background of the knowing subject”\textsuperscript{54}. In the humanities, however, “the course and structure of development are altogether different.”\textsuperscript{55} It goes without saying that such a form of methodological dualism cannot be acceptable for the proponents of the Strong Programme – and not just for them.\textsuperscript{56} Manley Thompson has characterized naturalism as “the view that the methods of natural science provide the only avenue to truth”.\textsuperscript{57} In this sense, to be sure, Mannheim’s position is anti-naturalistic.

From this undeniable anti-naturalist, methodological dualism of Mannheim, it is a short way to take his exemption of the contents of the natural sciences from the thesis of existential determination as an argument against the relativistic implications of his sociology of knowledge – as, in fact, Bernd Schofer has proposed.\textsuperscript{58} Thus Mannheim claims that

the accusation of relativism derives from a philosophy which professes an inadequate conception of ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’; a philosophy which confronts ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’ in a way which makes sense in the sphere of so-called exact science.\textsuperscript{59}

Notice, however, that – in accordance with Mannheim’s thought – it is not simply the restriction of the sociology of knowledge to the contents of the humanities that is at work here. It is crucial to see that it is not the restriction of the thesis of existential determination that is supposed to debilitate the reproach of relativism, but exhibiting the alleged inadequacy of a certain philosophical approach to the knowledge of the humanities and social sciences, an approach that is according to Mannheim adequate only for the natural sciences.\textsuperscript{60} In fact, a simple restriction of scope cannot help to counter the reproach of relativism that is at issue here, since Mannheim tries to answer the reproach concerning the knowledge of the humanities, and answering this reproach by pointing to the knowledge of the natural sciences would – on Mannheim’s assumption of the cru-

\textsuperscript{55} Mannheim 1982, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{56} Cf. e.g. Bloor 1991, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{57} Thompson 1964, p. 193, cf. also Keil/Schnädelbach 2000, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{58} Cf. Schofer 1999, p. 45. Especially Mannheim’s claim about the linear development and the accumulation of truth and knowledge in the natural sciences cannot be accepted by those relativists in the sociology of scientific knowledge who see themselves in a Kuhnian heritage (cf. especially Barnes 1982 and also Barnes’ contribution to this volume).
\textsuperscript{59} Mannheim 1952 d, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{60} Cf. Kaiser 1998, p. 52.
cial differences of the humanities and the natural sciences – simply be to change the topic. To say it shortly: Mannheim does not react to relativism by proposing a merely local relativism, but by attacking the philosophical and epistemological presuppositions of the attack. And he does so, as will be shown in turn, by naturalizing epistemology in a sense.

**Mannheim’s Naturalism and Anti-Foundationalism**

Let us investigate Mannheim’s attack on the philosophical background of the critic’s reproach in detail. Despite Mannheim’s clear anti-naturalist, methodological dualism of understanding and explanation, there is a sense in which Mannheim’s position can be called naturalistic.

In the present context, it is methodological naturalism that is at issue and I will distinguish between two different theses in naturalistic positions. In the modern classic of naturalized epistemology, namely Quine, these theses are combined: Quine argues against “the goal of a first philosophy prior to natural science” and “see[s] philosophy not as an a priori propaedeutic or groundwork for science, but as continuous with science”. The first thesis, to be detectable in Quine, is a thesis about the methodology of disciplines and claims that there is only one kind of scientific methods for all genuine scientific work. The second thesis that can be found in Quine is a thesis about the relationship between epistemology and empirical investigations in general and denies that epistemology should be the a priori foundation of the empirical sciences.

The first thesis can be found in many descriptions of naturalism. Thus, e.g., Arthur Danto claims:

> Naturalism […] is a species of philosophical monism according to which whatever exists or happens is natural in the sense of being susceptible to explanation through methods which, although paradigmatically exemplified in the natural sciences, are continuous from domain to domain of objects and events.

---

61 It is an interesting question how some forms of methodological naturalism are related and possibly dependent on some forms of ontological naturalism. For the present purpose, however, it is not necessary to look at these relations in detail.

62 There are many forms of naturalism, but for the present purpose a more fine-grained distinction is not necessary. Cf. for such a project: Haack 1993 a, Koppelberg 1996.

63 Quine 1981 a, p. 67, cf. also Quine 1981 a, p. 72, Quine 1981 b, p. 20.

64 Quine 1969, p. 126.

In the following, therefore, I will refer to the first thesis as the thesis of *monistic methodological naturalism*. However, the second thesis can also be found in many writings on naturalism. For example, Dirk Koppelberg describes the ‘traditional-analytic epistemology’ against which naturalistic epistemology objects to as consisting of two theses:

1. In its status as discipline epistemology is independent of our empirical beliefs and of the sciences, because it previously aims at providing the foundations for these. This is the thesis of disciplinary autonomy. 2. In its methodological procedure epistemology is committed to pure conceptual analysis, whose results can be recognized a priori and are valid necessarily. This is the thesis of concept-analytic autonomy.66

In the following, therefore, I will refer to the second thesis of naturalism that aims at denying this picture of traditional-analytic epistemology as the thesis of *anti-foundationalist methodological naturalism*.

We have already seen that Mannheim is attacking *monistic methodological naturalism*. However, in order to understand Mannheim’s position concerning the natural sciences more clearly, it is necessary to note that he *explicitly* argues against the picture of traditional-analytic epistemology just described and therefore *defends* an *anti-foundationalist methodological naturalism*.67 He “adduce[s] those arguments which undermine or at least call into question the absolute autonomy and primacy of epistemology as over against the special sciences”68 and claims that “notwithstanding its claim to be the fundamental science and the critique of all experience as such, epistemology in fact always exists only as a justification of a mode of thought already existing or just emerging”.69 Mannheim investigates the relationship between the special sciences and epistemology. His picture of this relationship is that of a mutual foundation. On the one hand, epistemology is supposed to be foundational in that “it supplies the basic justifications for the types of knowledge”70 of the special sciences. Mannheim’s position implies “no denial […] of the importance of episte-

67 Cf. also Frisby 1993, p. 170, Raven et al. 1992, pp. xiii f., Remmling 1973, p. 23. Frisby sees a connection to Kuhn: “Mannheim here anticipates some elements of Kuhn’s argument concerning the development of scientific knowledge in that he argues that revolutions in epistemology succeed revolutions in science and not vice versa and, in that, he sees epistemology as a mode of legitimation of the existing state of science” (Frisby 1993, p. 170).
68 Mannheim 1946, p. 259.
69 Mannheim 1952b, p. 227.
70 Mannheim 1946, p. 259.
mology or philosophy as such." On the other hand, however, he is also convinced that epistemology is not independent of science, but influenced by the form science takes at a given moment. Thus, “[in] principle, no doubt, [epistemology] claims to be the basis of all science but in fact it is determined by the condition of science at any given time.” He clearly debilitates against the thesis of disciplinary autonomy as described above:

[The] belief is no longer tenable that epistemology and noology, because of their justifiable claim to foundational functions, must develop autonomously and independently of the progress of the special sciences, and are not subject to basic modifications by these.

We see Mannheim’s denial of what we have called ‘traditional-analytic epistemology’ in the following remarkable passage:

71 Mannheim 1946, p. 260. Whether or not Quine aims at conducting epistemology wholly within the natural sciences or not, and whether Quine proposes what has been called a “replacement naturalism” (Cf. Feldman 2001) is the issue of debate. Quinean naturalism famously sees ‘epistemology, or something like it, as a chapter of psychology’ (Cf. Quine 1969, p. 82). See on the two faces of Quine’s naturalism: Haack 1993b.

In addition, Mannheim’s position is not as clear as it seems: In his essay ‘Historicism’ he claims that from his new ‘dynamic point of view’ “the place of epistemology as a fundamental science will be taken by the philosophy of history as a dynamic metaphysic; all problems as to how the various realms of thought and life are ‘grounded’ in one another become re-oriented anew around this point of departure” (Mannheim 1952d, p. 97, improved translation, cf. also Mannheim 1952d, p. 127). Mannheim’s later turn away from history to the sociology of knowledge might also be interpreted as implying that “[the sociology of knowledge] will in fact be the master science dealing with the validity of knowledge, taking the place of epistemology” (Kecskemeti 1952, p. 18) and “the decisive thesis that sociology is the fundamental science providing the criteria for the validity of socio-existentially determined knowledge” (Remmling 1975, p. 23). Thus, it is possible to discern reductionist tendencies also in Mannheim’s thought. Mannheim himself, however, explicitly denies such a kind of reductionism: “First, what must be said quite clearly is that I do not wish to replace philosophy by sociology” (Mannheim 1993, p. 445).

72 Mannheim 1946, p. 259, cf. also Mannheim 1952c, p. 37: “Methodology seeks but to make explicit in logical terms what is de facto going on in living research.”

73 Mannheim 1946, p. 259, cf. also Mannheim 1982, pp. 151f. “To see clearly in these matters, one must not forget that philosophy, life, and scientific knowledge never go along side by side in isolation. Philosophy, in its various tendencies, always rises, rather, out of a current of life (and usually one that is social conditioned), and serves as pioneer for it, first formulating, in premonitory anticipation and programatically, the new ‘will to the world’ (Weltwollen), only to return in the sequel and penetrate life and science itself.”
New forms of knowledge, in the last analysis, grow out of the conditions of collective life and do not depend for their emergence upon the prior demonstration by a theory of knowledge that they are possible; they do not therefore need to be first legitimized by an epistemology. The relationship is quite the reverse: the development of theories of scientific knowledge takes place in the preoccupation with empirical data and the fortunes of the former vary with those of the latter. The revolutions in methodology and epistemology are always sequels and repercussions of the revolutions in the immediate empirical procedures for getting knowledge. Only through constant recourse to the procedure of the special empirical sciences can the epistemological foundations be made sufficiently flexible and extended so that they will not only sanction the claims of the older forms of knowledge (their original purpose) but will also support newer forms. This peculiar situation is characteristic to all theoretical, philosophical disciplines. Its structure is most clearly perceivable in the philosophy of law which presumes to be the judge and critic of positive law, but which is actually, in most cases, no more than a post facto formulation and justification of the principles of positive law.\(^74\)

Now, decisively, this sort of naturalizing epistemology in the sense of anti-foundationalist methodological naturalism, does not stop short of the natural sciences. Undeniably, Mannheim identifies a static epistemology and methodology as the foundation of the natural sciences. This, however, is not unchangeable but, in accordance with Mannheim’s epistemological outlook, something to be investigated by historical and sociological means. Mannheim’s anti-foundationalist outlook also on the natural sciences can be seen quite clearly in the following quote:

Let a new mode of cognition with a certain paradigmatical structure arise, such as, for instance, modern natural science, and epistemology will try to explain it. […] Since it finds the paradigm as already given, its view will be oriented by this partial paradigm – also its concept of truth will be the product of this ex-post-situation. […] The most important fact of the point of view of the sociology of thought […] is that it is not, as one would be tempted to assume at first sight, one epistemology that struggles with another, but the struggle always goes on between already existing modes of thought, paradigms, which the respective epistemologies only serve to justify. In the historical-social context epistemologies are only advance posts in the struggle between thought-styles.\(^75\)

Mannheim’s picture concerning the natural-sciences is thus the following: A certain thought-style develops historically. We can investigate the

---

\(^74\) Mannheim 1946, pp. 259 f., cf. also Mannheim 1952b, pp. 227 f.

\(^75\) Mannheim 1952b, pp. 227 f.
thinking of this thought-style sociologically and historically. This, is true, also for the thought-style of the natural-sciences as Mannheim makes clear:

Also this thinking is not free-floating from the sociological point of view, since the basic impulses from which exact inquiry ascends are bound to a determinate stadium in social development [...] and the needs of the social still influence the questions and direction of inquiry of natural-scientific cognition.\(^{76}\)

Once we investigate the thought-style of the natural-sciences, however, we find – and this might undeniably prove wrong – a cumulative growth of knowledge in the history of the natural sciences. Therefore, in accordance with anti-foundationalist methodological naturalism, Mannheim can claim that also the thinking in the natural sciences is socially conditioned\(^{77}\) and investigate this social determination at length,\(^{78}\) but come to the conclusion that the contents of the natural-sciences are exempted from the thesis of existential-determination: It is the socially dependent and historically investigable “paradigm of thought of the exact natural-sciences”\(^{79}\) itself that includes the ideal of absolute truth.\(^{80}\) For Mannheim, therefore, the “ultimate task in this respect is to re-interpret the phenomenon of static thought – as exemplified by natural science and by other manifestations of the civilizational sphere in general – from a dynamic point of view.”\(^{81}\) Thus, it is Mannheim’s denial of a traditional-analytic epistemological outlook that explains his alleged ambivalence concerning the natural sciences: If epistemology and the sciences go on a par, it is by no means surprising that Mannheim sees a relational epistemology in the natural sciences in case the historical investigation reveals that they

---

\(^{76}\) Mannheim 1984, p. 66 (my translation).

\(^{77}\) Cf. Mannheim 1984, p. 66.


\(^{79}\) Mannheim 1946, p. 261 (improved translation).

\(^{80}\) Cf. Mannheim 1946, p. 262: “We see, therefore, not merely that the notion of knowledge in general is dependent upon the prevailing form of knowledge and the modes of knowing expressed therein and accepted as ideal, but also that the concept of truth itself is dependent upon the already existing types of knowledge.” Cf. also Mannheim 1952b, p. 227.

Mannheim investigates the social and political components of the absolute conception of truth and the ‘demand of universal validity’: “With this, there was revealed a purely sociological component in the criterion of truth, namely, the democratic demand that these truths should be the same for everyone. This demand for universality had marked consequences for the accompanying theory of knowledge” (Mannheim 1946, p. 149).

\(^{81}\) Mannheim 1952d, p. 132.
demand it. And if the historical investigation unveiled an hitherto unknown relationism in the natural sciences, also the contents of knowledge in these areas could be investigated by sociological means.

We can now assess the interpretations of Mannheim according to the picture just revealed from his writings. First of all, it should be clear by now that Mannheim does not exempt the natural sciences from being in purview of sociological investigations: Thinking in the natural sciences, according to Mannheim, develops in determinate historical and social situations and we can investigate this development – in fact, Mannheim does at points. Secondly, Mannheim’s exemption of the contents of knowledge in the natural sciences is not an expression of lack of nerve and will as the failure-of-nerve-thesis suggests. The reason for the exemption is his own analysis of the social and historical background of thinking in the natural sciences. Mannheim might be wrong in thinking that the natural sciences historically developed cumulative. However, Mannheim’s claim need to be understood to be a fallible, historical and sociological claim – not a claim of a sociologist suddenly starting dubious philosophical speculations once his nerve failed him. Thirdly, the claim that Mannheim believes in the preferability and epistemic privilege of knowledge in the natural sciences cannot be sustained once we take serious Mannheim’s denial of monistic methodological naturalism. If Mannheim thought of knowledge in the natural sciences as preferable and epistemically privileged, we should have expected that he pleads for an attempt to purify knowledge in the humanities from the vitiating elements. However, Mannheim does quite the contrary and espouses – as we have seen in the quote above – for an emancipation of the humanities from the methods of the natural sciences. In fact, Mannheim explicitly thinks – quite in accord with his philosophical tradition – that “there are also elements in this knowledge which assure deeper penetration into its object than there is ever possible in the exact sciences” such that “[there] is a moment within qualitative knowledge by virtue of which it is unquestionably superior to natural-scientific knowledge”.

I do not see how Mannheim 1982, p. 252, cf. also Mannheim’s diagnosis that “We shall see in this a defect of existentially-determined thinking only if we adopt a methodology based upon the exact natural sciences as a model” (Mannheim 1952b, p. 194).
to reconcile these statements with the claim that Mannheim thinks of knowledge in the natural sciences as preferable or epistemically privileged to existentially determined knowledge.

What, however, about the interpretation that Mannheim exempted the contents of knowledge in the natural sciences since he believes that the knowledge in these areas is as a matter of principle of a fundamentally different kind than knowledge in the areas of existentially determined thought and that the distinction between these areas is not contingent. My interpretation resting on the distinction between naturalistic and anti-naturalistic trains of thought in Mannheim’s position appears to sustain this interpretation: Mannheim’s denial of monistic methodological naturalism suggests that the objects in the areas of the humanities and the natural sciences are of fundamentally different kinds such that this Mannheimian distinction explains his exemption of the content of knowledge in the natural sciences from sociological analysis.

Again, we need to understand that Mannheim proposes an anti-foundationalist methodological naturalism in order to see why this interpretation cannot be correct. Recall that Mannheim thinks that “notwithstanding its claim to be the fundamental science and the critique of all experience as such, epistemology in fact always exists only as a justification of a mode of thought already existing or just emerging”.

Now, as we have seen, for Mannheim this diagnosis does not stop short of thinking in the natural sciences. And, decisively, it also does not stop short of Mannheim’s own thinking. Therefore, as we can see in many places of his work, Mannheim clearly proposes a principle of reflexivity – a principle of the applicability of his theories and views to his own position. If he does so consistently, then Mannheim also needs to view his own division of methods in the humanities and the natural sciences as the product of a certain episode in history and a determinate social constellation. And, this is exactly Mannheim’s consequence:

How far our own account is positionally determined and how far we are aware of this, we wish to clarify by a remark which is essential to the thesis propounded here. At the beginning of this paper, we postulated a rigid methodological dualism between the exact sciences and the ‘historical-cultural sciences’. This dualism cannot

---

83 Mannheim 1952 b, p. 227.
be the final form in which the problem of scientific method presents itself. [...] We find ourselves, however, at a stage in the history of thought which is so preoccupied with special disciplines and thus with partial systems that philosophical construction unavoidably slips back into one of these ‘partial’ systems and therefore into methodology – even where this was not intended. We just ‘see’ thought still either from the point of view of the natural sciences or of late more and more from that of the historical sciences\textsuperscript{85}.

From this quote, it is clear that Mannheim does not think of a divide in principle of the methods of the natural sciences and the humanities. He explicitly claims “that the justification for a duality (or plurality) of methods of thought does not lie in the area of inquiry.”\textsuperscript{86} His own monistic methodological naturalism is – quite in accord with his own anti-foundationalist methodological naturalism – the ex post expression of a specific historical and social situation. Mannheim, therefore, – to quote Robert Brandom from another context – “treat[s] the distinction between things that have natures and things that have histories, between things studied by the Naturwissenschaften and things studied by the Geisteswissenschaften, as itself a cultural formation.”\textsuperscript{87} Recall Mannheim’s statement that “the revolutions in methodology and epistemology are always sequels and repercussions of the revolutions in the immediate empirical procedures for getting knowledge.”\textsuperscript{88} There is no reason to think that Mannheim exempts his own methodology from this rule and believes in an absolute distinction between the methodologies adequate for different realms of thought.

One obvious rejoinder comes to mind: Surely, it might be argued, I have shown by quoting in detail from Mannheim’s work that Mannheim’s attitude towards the sociological treatment of knowledge in the natural sciences is much more complicated than usually has been thought. However, as revealing as this might be, it does not speak against the traditional interpretation – it speaks against clarity in Mannheim’s own thought. Thus, the critic might suggest, I have constantly omitted those quotes from Mannheim’s work that clearly speak in favour of the traditional interpretation.

My final task, thus, will be to show that even the quotes that allegedly

\textsuperscript{85} Mannheim 1952d, p. 130 Fn. 1.
\textsuperscript{86} Diskussion 1982, p. 398 (my translation), cf. also Mannheim 2003, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{87} Brandom 2000, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{88} Mannheim 1946, p. 260.
bespeak the traditional interpretation cannot be used to demur my interpretational thesis. Here is the quote that is constantly referred to in order to sustain the traditional interpretation:

The existential relatedness of thought may be regarded as a demonstrated fact in those realms of thought in which we can show [...] that the process of knowing does not as a matter of fact develop historically in accordance with immanent laws, that it does not follow only from the 'nature of things' or from 'pure logical possibilities', and that it is not driven by an 'inner dialectic'. On the contrary, the emergence and the crystallization of actual thought is influenced in many decisive points by extra-theoretical factors of the most diverse sort. These may be called, in contradistinction to purely theoretical factors, existential factors.  

It is exactly this quote that is used by Bloor whenever he is going to sustain his ‘failure-of-nerve-thesis’. The italics in this quote are mine – they are set in order to emphasize the key notions that are important for the interpretation along the traditional lines. Thus, so the argument goes, as can be seen clearly in the quote Mannheim distinguishes between different realms of thought. Those where there are existential factors to be investigated by the sociology of knowledge. And those in which thinking develops in accordance with ‘immanent laws’ and by inner, purely theoretical factors. Here, the sociology of knowledge has nothing to investigate, since there are supposed to be no social causes, unfortunately identified with ‘extra-theoretical factors’ by Mannheim, in play. Such knowledge, pure and unconstrained by social factors is taken by Mannheim to be “apparently autonomous” and “preferable to other kinds of knowledge”.

As I said in the very beginning, surely Mannheim exempts the contents of knowledge in the natural sciences and mathematics from sociological analyses and it would be absurd to claim the contrary if we take the quote above seriously. However, once we have a look on the quote again we see that the quote actually sustains my interpretation of Mannheim. Thus, take the quote with a different emphasize marked again by italics of mine:

The existential relatedness of thought may be regarded as a demonstrated fact in those realms of thought in which we can show [...] that the process of knowing does not as a matter of fact develop historically in accordance with immanent laws, that

---

89 Mannheim 1946, pp. 239 f. (improved translation).
91 Bloor 1991, p. 11.
92 Barnes 1977, p. 3.
it does not follow only from the ‘nature of things’ or from ‘pure logical possibilities’, and that it is not driven by an ‘inner dialectic’. On the contrary, the emergence and the crystallization of actual thought is influenced in many decisive points by extra-theoretical factors of the most diverse sort. These may be called, in contradistinction to purely theoretical factors, existential factors.

There is no failure of nerve or general retreat from sociological investigation once it comes to the realms of knowledge in the natural sciences and mathematics. And there is no exemption of the contents of knowledge in these areas in principle. On the contrary, Mannheim sees the urgency to demonstrate the special character of knowledge here and to show that as a matter of fact these areas developed historically as he believes they did.

Concluding Remarks

My proposal has been to have a closer look at Mannheim’s famous thesis of the exemption of knowledge in the natural sciences from sociological analysis. First of all, it has been shown that Mannheim does not treat the natural sciences from being out of reach of sociology completely: He discusses the social and historical background of the thought-style of the natural sciences at length. Furthermore, it has been shown that many of the interpretations of Mannheim’s exemption of the contents of knowledge in the natural sciences fall short of being adequate. Mannheim’s exemption is not understandable as a failure of nerve expressing itself in philosophical speculation. On the contrary, Mannheim thinks that the historical and social analysis of thinking in the natural sciences reveals that as a matter of fact the contents of knowledge in these areas “[give] no clue as to when, where, and by whom [they] were formulated”.93

Mannheim also does not believe in the preferability or epistemic privilege of knowledge in the natural sciences: On the contrary, he thinks that knowledge in the humanities assures a deeper penetration into its object and, therefore, is superior especially in an epistemological manner. Also Mannheim does not believe in an absolute divide of methodologies demanded by the fundamentally different ‘nature’ of the objects of inquiry.

93 Mannheim 1946, p. 244.
in the different areas. His own denial of monistic methodological naturalism should be seen as reflexively in view of his anti-foundationalist methodological naturalism.

What is the upshot of all this for the discussion of relativism in the sociology of knowledge with regard to Mannheim’s position? I think that a fair discussion of Mannheim’s contribution should treat him as a respectable predecessor of relativistic thought in the sociology of knowledge. That is: I hope that my close inspection of his treatment of knowledge in the natural sciences reveals the prevalence of a kind of caricature of Mannheim’s position in recent discussion. Though I am surely no defender of Mannheim’s relationist position, a serious treatment of his thought might prove fruitful not only for historical reasons.

**Bibliography**


