

HERMANN COHEN'S CRITICAL IDEALISM

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Edited by

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*University of Leiden and Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam,
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PREFACE

Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) is generally considered to be the leading systematic thinker and the outspoken representative of the Marburg School of Critical Idealism. The Marburg School was a leading school in German academic philosophy and in German Jewish philosophy for a period of more than thirty years preceding the First World War. Initially standing at the front of the 'Return to Kant' movement in nineteenth-century German philosophy, Cohen subsequently went beyond Kant in developing a system of critical idealism in which he offered a critique of and alternative to absolute idealism, positivism, and materialism. As a critical idealist in heart and soul Cohen is also recognized as a man who embodied German Jewish culture.

Over the past decades we have witnessed a growing interest in the thought of Hermann Cohen. The increasing number of publications on Cohen by scholars in the field of modern philosophy and modern Jewish philosophy can be characterized in rather general terms as aiming at a historical and systematic analysis of this classic author in modern philosophy and as an attempt to continue the legacy of critical idealism in philosophy and the philosophical articulation of Judaism. The growing interest in Cohen's work is also exemplified by recent translations of his writings into Italian, French, and Spanish, as well as by the publication of his *Werke* in seventeen volumes. The collected writings are edited under the direction of the Hermann Cohen Archives and its director, Helmut Holzhey, and are published by Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, Germany.

Publications on Cohen in the English language are rather small in number. The present volume aims at partially filling this gap. The book offers an analysis of Cohen's *System of Philosophy* — the three-volume classic on logic, ethics, and aesthetics — and his writings on Judaism and religion. The book aims at highlighting Cohen's contributions in these fields, including his discussions with, among others, Maimonides, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel. It will also demonstrate the congeniality of Cohen's critical idealism as expounded in the *System* and his writings on Ju-

daism. The articles included here offer an overview of contemporary Cohen research. They are all original and written for the present collection by scholars from Switzerland, Italy, Great Britain, France, Canada, and the United States.

Thanks and gratitude are due to my graduate student Erik Kreiter, who served as a most reliable acting editor of this volume, and to the Adolf Aussenberg Foundation for its generous support in the preparation of this volume for publication.

The editor

ABBREVIATIONS

Works of Hermann Cohen

Werke

Werke, herausgegeben vom Hermann-Cohen-Archiv am Philosophischen Seminar Zürich unter der Leitung von Helmut Holzhey, Hildesheim/Zürich/New York, 1977ff.

Kants Theorie der Erfahrung

Kants Theorie der Erfahrung, Berlin, 1871, 1885², 1918³. Reprint of the third edition: *Werke*, volume 1/I-III.

Kants Begründung der Ethik

Kants Begründung der Ethik, Berlin, 1877, 1910². Reprint of the second edition: *Werke*, volume 2.

Kants Begründung der Ästhetik

Kants Begründung der Ästhetik, Berlin, 1889.

Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode

Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte. Ein Kapitel zur Grundlegung der Erkenntnisskritik, Berlin, 1883. Reprint: *Schriften*, volume 2, 1-170, Frankfurt am Main, 1968, and *Werke*, volume 5/I.

Einleitung

Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag zu F. A. Langes Geschichte des Materialismus, Leipzig, 1896, 1902², 1914³. Reprint of the third edition: *Schriften*, volume 2, 171-302 and *Werke*, volume 5/II.

Logik

Logik der reinen Erkenntnis. System der Philosophie. Erster Teil, Berlin, 1902, 1914². Reprint of the second edition: *Werke*, volume 6.

Ethik

Ethik des reinen Willens. System der Philosophie. Zweiter Teil, Berlin, 1904, 1907². Reprint of the second edition: *Werke*, volume 7.

Ästhetik

Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls. System der Philosophie. Dritter Teil, 2 Bände, Berlin, 1912. Reprint: *Werke*, volumes 8 and 9.

Der Begriff der Religion

Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie, Gießen, 1915. Reprint: *Werke*, volume 10.

Religion der Vernunft

Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums, herausgegeben von Ben Zion Kellermann, Leipzig, 1919, Frankfurt am Main, 1929².

Schriften

Hermann Cohens Schriften zur Philosophie und Zeitgeschichte, 2 Bände, herausgegeben von Albert Görland und Ernst Cassirer, Berlin, 1928.

Jüdische Schriften

Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften, 3 Bände, herausgegeben von Bruno Strauß, mit einer Einleitung von Franz Rosenzweig, Berlin, 1924.

Briefe

Briefe, ausgewählt und herausgegeben von Bertha und Bruno Strauß, Berlin, 1939.

*Works of Immanuel Kant**Kritik der reinen Vernunft*

Kritik der reinen Vernunft, Riga, 1781 (A), 1787²(B).

Akademie Ausgabe

Other works of Immanuel Kant will be cited according to: *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, herausgegeben von der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, 1910ff.

INTRODUCTION

COHEN AND THE MARBURG SCHOOL IN CONTEXT

HELMUT HOLZHEY, ZÜRICH

1. Neo-Kantianism in Germany: The Historical Background

In 1871 Friedrich Ueberweg observed in his résumé of ‘the present state of philosophy in Germany’ that while during the past several decades the Hegelian and Herbartian schools had dominated the philosophical scene, ‘recently a return in part to Aristotle and in part to Kant’ had gained more adherents than the post-Kantian doctrines of German Idealism. He further referred to philosophers who had taken up the teachings of Schopenhauer and Beneke as well as to a number of proponents of materialism (Karl Vogt, Jakob Moleschott, Ludwig Büchner), adding that Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, Gustav Theodor Fechner, Rudolph Hermann Lotze, Eduard von Hartmann and others had gone new ways.¹ By 1870 the Hegelian school was indeed past its peak and neo-Kantianism began to unfold, initially in parallel to positivism and always differentiated from the philosophies of Schopenhauer, Herbart, and the materialists.² The motivation to ‘return to Kant’ was considerably increased by Friedrich Albert Lange (1828-1875) who, in the widely read second edition of his *Geschichte des Materialismus* (1875) spoke of ‘a young school of Kantians in a narrower and wider sense of the word’. Among these he counted Otto Liebmann, Jürgen Bona Meyer, and Hermann Cohen. Lange admitted that Cohen’s book *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (1871) had inspired him to revise his presentation of the Kantian system.³

Translated from the German by Vilem Mudroch

¹ F. Ueberweg, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie der Neuzeit* (Berlin, 1872³), 329.

² The expression ‘neo-Kantianism’ as a label for a philosophical movement appeared around 1875. Cf. H. Holzhey, ‘Neukantianismus’, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 6 (Basel, 1984), columns 747-754.

In Germany Kant's thought exercised some influence during all of the nineteenth century. It became especially prominent in the ideological debates after the failed revolution of 1848, when, during the post-revolutionary stage of repression, a 'critical', ideologically neutral position arose that was sceptical towards metaphysics and that instead resorted to epistemology.⁴ Kant was present outside of Germany as well. However, while the reception of Kant in England, which promoted the critique of empiricism, hardly assumed the form of genuine neo-Kantianism, and while in France (Charles Renouvier) and in Italy (Carlo Cantoni and others) some notable neo-Kantian tendencies did appear, it was only in Germany that a full blown Kantian movement emerged. Around the time of the founding of the German Empire in 1871 a philosophical new beginning based on Kant was made. The philosophical revitalization effected by neo-Kantianism coincided with the scientific and technological progress of the Wilhelminian era. Later, this movement split up into divergent directions and was partially institutionalized in different schools.

The beginning was made by individual, young philosophers, who in 1871 had just turned thirty years of age or were even younger; the most important ones were Otto Liebmann (1840-1912), Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), Alois Riehl (1844-1924), and Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915). Their publications do not represent a unified position. This was caused mainly by the fact that the young Kantians owed their philosophical training to different traditions. Liebmann and Windelband were students of Kuno Fischer in Jena, whose understanding of Kant was marked by idealistic tendencies. Riehl and Cohen had been schooled in contemporary psychology and were both strongly interested in science. In spite of these differences a common direction can be identified. The authors argued anti-naturalistically and anti-

³ F. A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, Vorrede und Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag von Hermann Cohen, 2. Buch: *Geschichte des Materialismus seit Kant* (Leipzig, 1896⁵), vol. 2, 115.

⁴ Cf. K. C. Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus. Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie zwischen Idealismus und Positivismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), esp. 175ff.

materialistically, thus declining the all too obvious option of capitalizing on the great general respect for science. In the so-called *Kulturkampf* between the Prussian government and the Catholic Church they maintained an anti-clerical position, criticising the tutelage of the Church. Faced with the rampant adherence to Schopenhauer they assumed an anti-pessimistic stance. As a consequence they justified and defended the ideal of civil liberty.⁵

Along with other factors the divergent backgrounds determined the nature of the separation of neo-Kantianism into the different schools. Cohen, who from early on was motivated by an interest in the 'idealism in science', developed a 'critical idealism' for epistemology and ethics, an approach that eventually furnished the 'Marburg School' with its leading pattern of thought. For this purpose, he especially embraced Friedrich Albert Lange's criticism of materialism as it was presented in the latter's *Geschichte des Materialismus*. However, while Lange, when confronted with the need for ethical orientation, advocated a 'standpoint of ideal', to be arrived at by a process of 'free conceptual poetic composition',⁶ Cohen championed, instead of the poetic approach to the ideas of reason, a logical one and thus sought a strictly 'epistemological foundation of ethics'.⁷ Of some importance for this conception was a reconstruction of Plato's ideas as pure foundations (hypotheses) of knowledge. Ideas were conceived as the instruments of knowledge of a particular kind, but not as independently existing entities. This non-metaphysical employment of Plato's philosophy was made possible by the distinction between, on the one hand, the being of things, the occurrence of events, and the existence of relations and, on the other hand, the validity of propositions. Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), who developed this distinction, fundamental for the whole of neo-Kantianism, in 1874, identified the alleged 'being' of Platonic ideas with the 'validity of truths'.⁸ Wilhelm Windel-

⁵ Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus*, 321.

⁶ F.A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, ed. A. Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), 981ff.

⁷ *Kants Begründung der Ethik*, vi.

⁸ Cohen, 'Platons Ideenlehre und die Mathematik' (1878), *Schriften I*, 336-366. Cf. H. Lotze, *Logik. Drei Bücher vom Denken, vom Untersuchen und Erkennen*, ed. G. Misch (Leipzig, 1912), 505ff.

band's writings were influenced directly by Lotze, and it was the latter's conception of validity that became the foundation of the understanding of logic and philosophy in 'Southwest German neo-Kantianism'. The decisive impulse for this direction of neo-Kantianism, however, was provided by Kuno Fischer's Fichtean understanding of Kant.⁹

Although the Marburg and the Southwest schools were separated by virtue of the fact that they had different founders, they did share a common critical idealism that distinguished them from a *critical realism* as it was propounded for instance by Alois Riehl. This third large scale attempt to re-appropriate Kant's critical philosophy in a contemporary form was marked by an appreciation of tradition and of empiricism.¹⁰ Not only were the empirical sciences analyzed here in order to identify their rational a priori elements, but the 'real' elements representing the given were acknowledged as well. In general, the early neo-Kantianism of the 1870s was characterized by a multitude of ties to positivism.

Since the 1920s it has been generally accepted that neo-Kantianism had been composed of only two schools. Riehl's realistic interpretation of Kant seems to have led to Oswald Külpe's 'critical realism' and thus no longer counted as neo-Kantianism. While the Marburg School, represented by Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, and the early Ernst Cassirer, explicitly claimed to be Kant's true heir, in spite of integrating, after the turn of the century, the philosophy of Leibniz, the theory of value oriented criticism of the Southwestern School with its main representatives Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Emil Lask participated in the Hegel-Renaissance;¹¹ its representative organ was the journal *Logos* (1910-1933).

Born as the only son of Friederike (maiden name Salomon) and Gerson Cohen on July 4, 1842 in Coswig (Anhalt), young Hermann was instructed in Hebrew and literature since the age of

⁹ K. Fischer, *Immanuel Kant. Entwicklungsgeschichte und System der kritischen Philosophie*, 2 vols. (Mannheim, 1860).

¹⁰ A. Riehl, *Der philosophische Kriticismus und seine Bedeutung für die positive Wissenschaft*, vols. 1, 2.1, 2.2, (1876-1887).

¹¹ Cf. H. Levy, *Die Hegel-Renaissance in der deutschen Philosophie mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Neukantianismus* (Charlottenburg, 1927), 58ff.

three by his father, who was the cantor at the local synagogue and a teacher at the Jewish school in Coswig. In 1853 Hermann went to the high school (Gymnasium) at Dessau and in October 1857 to the Jewish Theological Seminary at Breslau. He quit the school three years later without graduating, but registered in 1861 at the Philosophical Faculty of the Breslau university. Some weeks after having earned his high school diploma, he switched in the autumn of 1864 to the university in Berlin, where he visited lectures by Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg and August Boeckh and attended courses in mathematics, science, and medicine, namely those by Emil du Bois Reymond. His first articles, among them 'Die platonische Ideenlehre psychologisch entwickelt', appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, a journal edited by H. Steinthal and Moritz Lazarus. Steinthal's work on the theory of language had a significant influence on Cohen's philosophical development.

In 1864/65 Cohen submitted a prize essay in Berlin, which failed to win the prize, but did receive praise from Trendelenburg,¹² and which presumably served as basis for a Latin dissertation on the teachings of Greek philosophers on the antinomy of necessity and accident. This was submitted in 1865 in Halle, where it was accepted. Having shared numerous tenets of Herbart's psychology for a number of years, Cohen found his way to Kant with a contribution to the discussion between Kuno Fischer and Adolf Trendelenburg concerning the proper understanding of Kant's theory of time and space. In 1871 Cohen published his *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, a work of fundamental importance for neo-Kantianism, both in philological and philosophical regard. In 1873 Cohen obtained his *Habilitation* in Marburg; in 1876 he became a professor of philosophy there, succeeding his deceased promoter Friedrich Albert Lange. Setting it as his goal to renew Kantian idealism, Cohen published his *Kants Begründung der Ethik* (1877, 1910²) and his *Kants Begründung der Ästhetik* (1889). These works, together with a significantly re-worked and expanded second edition of his *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (1885) and along with his study *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode* (1883) constituted the foundations for the teachings of the

¹² H. Cohen, *Briefe*, 19.

Marburg School. The goal of surmounting the methodological dualism of intuition and thought led Cohen to formulate his doctrine of the 'origin' of knowledge in pure thought in his *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (1902, 1914²), the first part of his *System der Philosophie*. In his second major systemic work, the *Ethik des reinen Willens* (1904, 1907²), he presented a doctrine of the 'ethical person', which, in accordance with Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, he subdivided into a doctrine of law and a doctrine of virtue. Here he justified his theory of ethical socialism and claimed that the teachings of religion were accommodated in ethics. In his *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (1912) he grounded the validity of artistic work and judgement in 'pure feeling', understood as a third direction of consciousness, connecting the theoretical and practical production of objects.

2. Hermann Cohen: *Life and Writings*

In 1912 Cohen became a professor emeritus and moved to Berlin. There he taught at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. He had published on philosophical-religious issues and had taken position in regard to religious, cultural, and political questions concerning Judaism already while in Marburg. Since his 'Bekenntnis in der Judenfrage' (1880), his contribution to the 'Berliner Antisemitismusstreit'¹³ that had been originated by Heinrich von Treitschke, and his expert opinion 'Die Nächstenliebe im Talmud' for the Marburg process of 1888, Cohen fought against the rampant antisemitism. Although he represented a liberal Judaism, he nevertheless vehemently insisted on the right to and the duty towards one's own religion. In May of 1914 Cohen visited a number of Jewish communities in Russia. His patriotism, at the outset of the First World War still undiminished, soon turned into bitterness and skepticism owing to the fresh outbreak of anti-Jewish sentiment. Prominent among the numerous works of his last years, some of them dealing with the relationship between the spirit of German culture

¹³ Cf. W. Boehlich (Hrsg.), *Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1965).

and the spirit of Jewish culture, are his study *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie* (1915) and the posthumously published *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (1919). The former leads on the basis of an esteem for the peculiarity of religious consciousness to a new concept of the individual, the latter connects Jewish religiosity with philosophical reason. In June of 1917 he proposed to commence on the fourth part of his system, the 'Psychology',¹⁴ in which the unity of cultural consciousness was to be developed in a definitive form. This proposal, however, was not materialized. Cohen died on April 4, 1918 in Berlin while correcting the proofs of his *Religion der Vernunft*.

3. Cohen's Early Psychological Studies and his First Interpretation of Kant

In the 1860s Cohen's writings were based on Herbart's psychology. Although he did distinguish between, on the one hand, 'deductive critique', whose task it was to prove the 'metaphysical competence' of a concept as well as its inner non-contradictoriness, and, on the other hand, psychological analysis, he was chiefly interested in the latter, i.e. in the explanation of the *origin* of all cultural phenomena in terms of human consciousness. He viewed Plato's theory of ideas as the beginning of the true, namely psychological philosophy, and interpreted *idea* as the 'living thought-act of seeing',¹⁵ in which the essence of things is grasped. Cohen also sought to provide a psychological explanation of the genesis of the Indo-European mythical ideas of God and of the soul (birth and death), i.e. a description of the 'psychological mechanism', which it was hoped would account for (the in itself already poetic) myth and especially for later poets' resort to myth;¹⁶ according to Cohen's insight the recogni-

¹⁴ Letter to Paul Natorp of June 10, 1917, in: H. Holzhey, *Cohen und Natorp*, vol. 2: *Der Marburger Neukantianismus in Quellen* (Basel, 1986), 480.

¹⁵ *Schriften* I, 61.

¹⁶ H. Cohen, 'Die dichterische Phantasie und der Mechanismus des Bewusstseins', *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* 6 (1869), 173-263, reprinted in: *Schriften* I, 141-228.

tion that the *connection* of ideas in the mythical consciousness was inadequate would lead to poetic *comparison*. Poetry continues to maintain itself under the dominion of the scientific consciousness for two reasons. First, the poet acquires in his childhood ‘mythical apperceptions’, which as an adult he cannot fully discard as they render his world more comprehensible than would scientific thought. Secondly, as an individual, the poet is motivated to imitate traditional art and is supported in this endeavour, from an anthropological point of view, by the constancy of the objective spirit. Cohen’s psychological method was guided by the following theoretical conceptions: the hypothesis of the unity of consciousness; the goal of an analysis of mental processes into their elementary forms; a mechanical theory of association and apperception (following Herbart and Lazarus).

In 1869 Cohen participated for the first time in the contemporary attempts to gain a historically adequate and a topically fruitful understanding of Kant’s philosophy by contributing a statement to the controversy between Adolf Trendelenburg and Kuno Fischer.¹⁷ The former claimed to have discovered a gap in Kant’s proofs of the complete subjectivity of space and time; he claimed that the admittedly purely subjective forms of intuition were also objective, since he thought that they could have arisen from an original activity that was valid both for knowledge and for real things. Cohen addressed Trendelenburg’s doubts on the basis of a strict adherence to the ‘certified writings of Kant’,¹⁸ whose basic ideas he wished to work out and to defend against the most important attacks. The question what Kant taught on space and time was for Cohen not just a historical one, since he deemed that it concerned ‘the intersecting point of all profound contemporary directions of research [...] Does the nature of things depend on the conditions of our mind? Or must and *can* the law of nature prove our thought?’¹⁹ In order to distinguish between the old and the new the historian of philosophy wishing

¹⁷ H. Cohen, ‘Zur Controverse zwischen Trendelenburg und Kuno Fischer’, *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* 7 (1871), 249-296, reprinted in: *Schriften* I, 229-275.

¹⁸ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, iv.

¹⁹ *Schriften* I, 229.

'to present the continuous connection of philosophical problems in all of human culture' must begin by considering every thought as the 'result of a mental process',²⁰ a thought he must then both analyse as to its conditioning by historical facts and evaluate philosophically. Always with a view to dealing with Kant, Cohen met the methodological difficulty of proving the originality of an idea in its historical context by suggesting that the historian turns philosopher and voices his philosophical opinion. Aware that this would somewhat diminish the objective status of the writing of history, Cohen claimed that the loss would be compensated by the fact that topical participation and indeed intervention by the philosopher would complement purely historical research in a beneficial manner. This would be the case especially when philosophical problems, such as those of Kant, were still 'in motion' for the interpreter. Although in regard to discussions in which different participants appealed to Kant or marked their differences from him Cohen favoured 'fidelity' towards the original texts, he linked such faithfulness to the condition that the interpreter views himself as a 'criticist' who holds up his own as well as foreign ideas against the standard of what he himself considers to be Kantian.²¹

Cohen's return to Kant's theoretical philosophy was driven by two aims: first, to deprive the contemporary attacks on Kant of their textual basis by resorting to 'simple quotations',²² secondly, to restore 'Kantian authority' in the interest of the topical approach to philosophy.²³ Specifically, Cohen was concerned with a new justification of Kant's notion of the a priori. With this goal in mind Cohen provided a commentary on the Transcendental Aesthetic and Analytic in the first edition of his *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*. He closely linked his clarification and justification of Kant's a priori to the proof of his assertion that Kant 'discovered a new concept of experience', thus having delivered in the *Kritik*

²⁰ *Schriften* I, 271.

²¹ *Schriften* I, 272-273.

²² *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, iv. The criticism of Kant which Cohen especially dealt with is that by Schopenhauer, Herbart, Trendelenburg, Fischer, Lange, and Ueberweg. He was mainly in agreement, albeit in a critical way, with J. Bona Meyer, *Kants Psychologie* (Berlin, 1870).

²³ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, vi.

der reinen Vernunft a 'critique of experience'²⁴ which elucidates the possibility of experience in a transcendental investigation. Cohen took up Kant's question, how synthetic judgements a priori are possible, by pointing out that experience is constituted or constructed in an a priori and formal manner by 'space, time, and the synthetic unity'²⁵ and that it is given 'in mathematics and pure science with the character of necessity and generality'.²⁶ In his analysis of the a priori of space Cohen distinguished three stages or degrees in Kant's a priori: the latter signifies 1) metaphysical originality, 2) form, 3) the formal condition of the possibility of experience. While the first two stages may still support the misconception that the a priori is identical with the innate, the third degree, the transcendental knowledge of the a priori, compels us to definitely discard the pre-critical disjunction between innate and acquired.²⁷ In regard to the categories Cohen deviated from Kant by attributing a genuinely a priori character only to *the category* as the 'synthetic unity in the connection of the manifold', while claiming that *the categories* of the Kantian table are a priori merely in a secondary manner.²⁸ Based on the conception that the a priori of space, time, and the synthetic unity constitute the formal conditions of experience, Cohen then had to maintain that the concept of experience can be constructed out of these a priori elements.²⁹

Experience provides the criterion for ascertaining that a concept is meaningful. However, although Cohen here adhered to Kant literally, his recourse to experience for the purposes of such a conceptual test concerned not experience's material component (sensation), but its characteristic as the a priori form of sensibility. Cohen thus advocated a transcendental idealism that is critical as far as the method is concerned, but formal as far as the content goes. Its first step is an 'abstraction from the matter of experience'.³⁰ All reality consists of '*possible* experience, i.e. of

²⁴ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 3.

²⁵ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 104.

²⁶ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 208.

²⁷ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 87ff.

²⁸ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 101.

²⁹ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 104.

³⁰ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 243.

constructive intuition which places the constructed image into nature and of the 'self-thought' concepts of the understanding'.³¹ Although Cohen in his discussion of Kant's principle of actuality³² concedes that sensation, no less than the a priori, is a condition of experience, he further claims that this principle is based on the principle of the Anticipation of Perception,³³ by which a step is made to extend the a priori over the sphere of the empirical.³⁴

Referring to Kant's statements that 'the doctrine of sensibility is likewise the doctrine of the noumenon in the negative sense'³⁵ and that a noumenon is merely a *limiting concept*,³⁶ Cohen dealt in the last chapter of his *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* with the cosmological antinomy of pure reason and its solution in order to round off his transcendental idealism in regard to the ideas of reason with the following summary: 'The *idea-entities* of material idealism will become regulative principles whose unceasing employment is the only task of reason.'³⁷

4. Criticism of Kant and the Development of an Independent Logic of Knowledge

Cohen's above sketched interpretation of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* had a philosophical intent which went beyond Kant and which Cohen worked out in greater detail in the second edition of his *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (1885) and in his *Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode* (1883). While Kant distinguished between, on the one hand, the question of the possibility of non-empirical principles (synthetic judgements a priori) in mathematics and in science and, on the other hand, the question of the possibility of

³¹ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 253, my emphasis.

³² *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 218, B 266: 'That which is bound up with the material conditions of experience (with sensation) is *actual*.'

³³ *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 207: 'In all appearances, the real that is an object of sensation has intensive magnitude, that is, a degree.'

³⁴ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 214.

³⁵ *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 307.

³⁶ *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 255, B 310-1.

³⁷ *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 270.

a scientific metaphysics, Cohen recognized only the question of the foundation of possibility or validity of 'mathematical science'; metaphysics signified for him nothing but the problem of the possibility of scientific experience. But there is a second point of deviation from Kant. On Kant's theory experience is composed of the matter of sensible impressions and of the form originating in our own faculty of knowledge;³⁸ Cohen, however, focussed on experience solely as far as its form is concerned. This resulted from his conception that 'experience' is identical with 'mathematical science' and the latter is valid knowledge a priori. To enquire after the conditions of the validity of a priori knowledge under the heading of a transcendental theory of experience meant for Cohen from the beginning bracketing out the sensible-material component out of the concept of experience or including it in a formal determination of experience. Cohen devoted special effort to this idea of rendering experience a priori, or, more precisely, rendering sensation a priori, sensation in the sense of the sensible-material component of experience.

Cohen's point of departure was Kant's 'Principle of the Anticipations of Perception', according to which 'in all appearances, the real that is an object of sensation has intensive magnitude, that is, a degree'.³⁹ In order to generate a new concept of actuality Cohen re-structured Kant's principle into the 'principle of intensive magnitude or of anticipations'.⁴⁰ An important motivation was provided by psycho-physics, especially by the newly opened prospect of being able to measure the magnitude of sensations. The mathematical 'infinitesimal method' that was employed for this purpose became for Cohen a paradigm of the active role that thought played in the process of knowledge, in fact, it appeared to him to be the decisive methodological development in recent science. He sought the logical foundation of this method in the 'principle of intensive magnitude', which, however, merely claims that an intensive magnitude must be attributed to all real objects of perception. Cohen went beyond

³⁸ *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 1-2.

³⁹ *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 207

⁴⁰ *Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode*, 14.

this in wishing to ground the giving of the real in the attribution of magnitude, i.e. he attempted to situate reality as such in intensive magnitude. While for Kant sensation as the sensible-material component, in spite of its ability to be determined mathematically, remained indispensable if knowledge was to have reference to reality, for Cohen the sensibly given became an element of mathematical and logical thought. The giving of the real, of something in general, is the responsibility of thought, not of sensation. However, it is important to note that Cohen is speaking here of the essential condition of the *validity* of scientific knowledge, not of the *discovery* of knowledge. The validity of scientific knowledge is explained by Cohen independently of the empirically given: It is the *category* (determination of thought) of reality which ensures that consciousness has any reference to an x as a given, i.e. to an intuition. This connection between intuition and the category of reality is completed within the 'principle of intensive magnitude'. The logical-epistemological reason why the object is recognized as real (i.e. with the quality real) lies in the fact that the infinitesimal unit dx , the infinitely small, *produces* this reality. For example, 'the point on the tangent, which unites the different motions of a point in *one* direction, produces a curve in that direction'.⁴¹

The conception developed by Cohen in the 1880s became one of the leading doctrines of the Marburg School. Natorp admitted as late as 1915 his predilection for Cohen's determination of the relation between intuition and thought as it was to be found in the *Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode*. Natorp's remark must be understood with regard to the fact that Cohen ultimately abandoned the dualism of intuition and thought. The infinitesimal method became the emblem of the sovereignty of thought over being. The philosophical justification of the objective validity of knowledge without recourse to intuition, without

⁴¹ *Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode*, 34. Paul Natorp later made this more precise and in fact corrected it by claiming that it was not actually the point but the law that is the 'origin'; one may think of the law as concentrated in the point. When Cohen spoke of a producing point, then, claimed Natorp, the point should be viewed as the bearer of the law, out of which the extensional determination of magnitude is produced by integration. Cf. Natorp, *Die logischen Grundlagen der exakten Wissenschaften* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1910), 220.

reference to an x as a 'given', characterizes the program of Cohen's *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (1902). The justification of the validity of scientific knowledge became henceforth the subject matter of a logic requiring no preliminary discourse on intuition. Just as Cohen worked out an epistemological principle, namely the production of the real *qua* intensive magnitude in his publication of 1883, he similarly assigned a special status to a judgement, namely the 'judgement of the origin' in the first, foundational part of his *System der Philosophie*. 'Thought is thought of the origin'⁴² and remains so in all pure knowledge. That means that, borrowing from Plato's concept of *hypothesis*, all thought is conceived of as a *foundation*. Knowledge derives the basis of its validity solely from thought and not from a 'given' to which thought would have to refer. The pure ground of mathematical and scientific knowledge consists of an open system of judgements (analogous to Kant's principles of knowledge), a system of object-producing methods of pure thought. These methods ('judgements') are in their unifying functions not founded on the unity of pure self-consciousness, i.e. on what Kant termed 'transcendental apperception', but on the unity of analysis and synthesis that constitutes the judgement as such. Cohen claimed a homogeneity of the basic methods of pure thought and of scientific knowledge, so that he attributed an a priori character ('purity') to scientific knowledge, e.g. to the law of the conservation of energy. However, the element of the factual in 'experience' is maintained insofar as it is recognized that knowledge always includes its own infinite progress. This becomes plain in Cohen's treatment of the problem of *sensation*. Although the given is still founded in thought and not in intuition, and is thus to be produced logically, the 'claim of sensation' is nevertheless assessed in a positive way. Even if sensation itself cannot satisfy this claim of securing factual knowledge, the claim is included in the modal 'judgement of actuality' and is redeemed 'idealistically'. Corresponding to the extension of the problem of origin, a problem that was initially linked to the production of the finite real out of the infinitely small by means of an infinitesimal analysis, to a general logic of origin, the problem of sensation is ex-

⁴² *Logik*, 36.

panded to include not only the production of the real as special object determination, but, more generally, the critical evaluation of all pure object determinations in their relation to actuality. Although this evaluation is demanded under the heading 'sensation', for a *logic of pure knowledge* it can only be realised in pure thought — defined as the thought of the origin — as it is expressed in the 'judgement of actuality'.⁴³

With this conception of logic Cohen developed an original version of *critical idealism*. He rejected the attempts on the part of speculative idealism to construct the system of rational knowledge out of a principle or out of a complex of principles, nor did he admit the notion of the self-explication of absolute knowledge. He also refused the intention of analytic theory of science to generate formal criteria for the examination of 'given' scientific propositions. His kind of idealism deviates from metaphysics by virtue of the fact that for him 'the ultimate foundations of truth and science' are conceived as '*the laying of the foundations*', while for metaphysics they represent 'absolute foundations': 'as in being so in thought, placed and given in the mind'.⁴⁴ A laying of foundations that is capable of revision and that can be called to account on the one hand, rationally unprovable, fixed foundations about which no discussion is possible, i.e. foundations of an absolute kind on the other hand: that is the distinction which Cohen adduces against a fundamentalistic metaphysics, be it based on a naturalistic or a spiritualistic footing.⁴⁵ Critical idealism is satisfied with the 'most stringent', but also provable laying of foundations;⁴⁶ absolute and ultimate foundations invariably turn out to be illusory. The lay-

⁴³ *Logik*, 434. Cohen's 'judgement of actuality' takes in his system of pure knowledge the place of Kant's second postulate of empirical thought, 'That which is bound up with the material conditions of experience (with sensation) is actual', *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 218, B 265.

⁴⁴ *Logik*, 303.

⁴⁵ Cf. G. Edel, 'Kantianismus oder Platonismus? Hypothese als Grundbegriff der Philosophie Cohens', *Il cannocchiale / rivista di studi filosofici*, 1-2 (1991), 59-87, especially 73ff. I today fully concur with Edel's non-absolutistic interpretation of Cohen's theory of origin, unlike in my *Cohen und Naturp.*, vol. 1, 183, 218.

⁴⁶ Cf. Plato, *Phaedo*, 100a, 101d.

ing of the foundations follows *the transcendental method*,⁴⁷ in principle in all areas of philosophy, but providing guidance first as epistemology ('critique of knowledge', 'logic of pure knowledge'). An examination of the conditions of the possibility or of the validity of knowledge commences, according to this methodological conception, with existing scientific knowledge, characteristically with mathematics and science.

Cohen's *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* is in a way a 'repetition' of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Just as for Kant positive and negative critiques are entwined⁴⁸, so Cohen's logic owes its contours to critique on the one hand and to a positive thesis on the other. The critique is directed at both materialism and empiricism as well as at religious metaphysics; the positive goal is to prove the idealistic constitution of science. Cohen achieves this proof by de-ontologizing the philosophical concepts of knowledge and of science on the basis of his claim that all determinations of being are the products of pure thought.

In his Preface to the *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* Cohen declared his personal conviction that 'the ideology of idealism' is buttressed by the 'spirit of genuine philosophy'. *Idealism* is a key term in his philosophy, especially in regard to its cultural relevancy. At the same time, however, he was greatly concerned to emphasize that his position was *critical* idealism. When Cohen in his epistemology, as I have shown above, arrived at the notion of the 'constructive character of thought' and when he made the claim that 'the world of things reposes on the laws of thought',⁴⁹ he moved dangerously close to a subjective or spiritualistic, in short to a *dogmatic* idealism that attributes a divine creative power to humans or to the human mind. To avoid this relapse into metaphysics it would seem that Cohen would be compelled to admit that sensible experience makes a constitutive contribution to knowledge. However, as was pointed out earlier, sensibility for Cohen does not delineate sufficiently between a critical and a dogmatic idealism. Only the reference to the fact of science can achieve this. What matters is not the sensibly 'given' as

⁴⁷ Cf. H. Holzhey, *Cohen und Natorp*, vol. 1, 53ff.

⁴⁸ *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B xxiv-xxv.

⁴⁹ *Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode*, 125.

the empiricist or sensationalist holds, but that which is given in *science*. 'stars are not *given* in the sky, but in the reason of astronomy'.⁵⁰ The epistemological analysis is concerned solely with science and with the kind of given that has already been critically appraised within science. The 'fact of science' replaces sense-data. Science is, as Kant maintained in regard to pure mathematics and pure science, 'actually given',⁵¹ and this factuality secures, according to Cohen, the critical character of idealism. Things are neither simply 'produced' out of the laws of thought, nor is the reference to actuality on the part of scientific knowledge owing to data; what is crucial is rather a critical appraisal of the knowledge that has been gained, an appraisal that occurs within science itself. Science, into which sensible experience along with things have already been incorporated, thus provides the critical support for the kind of idealism that attempts to prove that knowledge is the result of constructively producing thought.

5. *The Ethical Motive of Critical Idealism*

Cohen's critical epistemology, issuing in a *logic* of scientific knowledge, is motivated in its idealistic orientation not only by a theoretical, but to a large extent also by an ethical concern. This point is systematically developed in the *Ethik des reinen Willens*. Just as Cohen's epistemology, divested of all ontological claims, refuses to have things given or shown to it and to ground productive thought in the natural human endowment, i.e. in 'physical-psychological organisation' (Friedrich Albert Lange), so an anti-ontological and anti-naturalistic spirit manifests itself in his ethics. In fact, the goal of securing a rationally founded ethics could be the true motive for Cohen's radical rejection of the given, under whose mask he suspected that matter 'continues its hauntingly frightening existence'.⁵² From a formal point of view his ethics is idealistic in the same sense as his epistemology, in that here too concepts are produced by an analysis of a pre-given

⁵⁰ *Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode*, 127.

⁵¹ *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 20.

⁵² *Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag*, 66.

scientific fact, specifically of the pure science of jurisprudence, concepts that then serve as the foundations of moral action. However, given this idealistic frame more is at stake than just the possibility of ethical knowledge. Indeed, the idealistic nature of ethics secures, along with the possibility of ethical knowledge, the notion of the autonomy of the acting person. In distinction to the logical laying of foundations of the knowledge of nature, ethics is concerned with the laying of foundations of normative human self-knowledge; Cohen uses here the expression 'self-consciousness'. 'Self-imposition of law' is succinctly identified as the 'principle of idealism'.⁵³ It is only at this point that the ethical motive of critical idealism becomes fully apparent. Relying on human nature (just as relying in epistemology on given things) would necessarily lead to moral heteronomy, i.e. to a constant 'idol-worship of nature'⁵⁴ in the form of instincts, of natural behaviour resulting from evolution, of natural needs etc. Against this *anthropological naturalism* Cohen defends in his ethical idealism the notion of a human being who makes it his task to 'eternally' perfect himself, and not solely or primarily as an individual. Apparently directed against Marx's historical materialism Cohen asserted: 'It is simply not true that the compulsion of nature and especially of animal nature in man produced those achievements of culture which can only hypocritically be called moral culture, and should rather be labelled economic.'⁵⁵

6. *Ethics According to the Transcendental Method*

In his second Kant-book⁵⁶ Cohen assumed that the theory of scientific knowledge, if only propelled all the way to heuristics, would conduct to the basic concepts of ethics such as freedom and purpose. In proceeding from epistemology to ethics he provided an interpretation, following which the thing in itself as a limiting concept regulatively determines the totality of the phe-

⁵³ *Ethik*, 328.

⁵⁴ *Ethik*, 329.

⁵⁵ *Ethik*, 37.

⁵⁶ *Kants Begründung der Ethik* (1877, 1910²).