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## The Interpretation of Kant

### 1. NEO-KANTIANISM

The problem of Cohen's reception of Kant should first be placed, briefly, within the context of the widespread Kantian movement which flourished in German philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries. The confines, contents, and articulation of this movement have been, and still are, the subject of extensive discussion among historians of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Here, I do not intend to give either a complete account of the matter, or an exhaustive historiographical judgment. I shall limit myself to those aspects which are essential for our problem.

The urgent need for a return to Kant, expressed by Zeller<sup>2</sup> in 1862 and by Liebmann<sup>3</sup> in 1865, was part of a particularly critical cultural situation for philosophy: the "collapse of the Hegelian system"<sup>4</sup> and, with it, that of the whole of philosophy (which for a long period had been bound up with speculative idealism and Hegel's system in particular) had left a gap in philosophical culture. A particularly fruitful time for science (physiology, biology, anthropology, etc.) had shifted interest and expectations in the direction of empirical research and the inductive method, and had contributed to mistrust and a feeling of "nausea"<sup>5</sup> for philosophical speculation. The need was still certainly felt for a general synthesis, for a fundamental response to philosophical, ethical, social, and religious problems.<sup>6</sup> What were forthcoming, however, were theories that were often crude and superficial, in their reliance on naive naturalistic objectivism and an illusory empirical method, taken over from

scientific research. The *Materialismstreit* controversy of 1850 through 1860 appeared to have come to an end with liberation from all metaphysical illusions and with the definitive establishment of materialistic dogma. Books such as *Köhlerglaube und Wissenschaft* (published in 1854 and reaching its sixth edition by 1856!) by Karl Vogt,<sup>7</sup> and especially *Kraft und Stoff* (1855, twenty-first edition by 1904!) by Ludwig Büchner<sup>8</sup> appeared to have opened up a new, more "scientific" conception of reality and man. Materialistic prejudice crossed the boundaries of specialization to take on the role of popular philosophy.

Neo-Kantianism came into being as a tentative response and critical alternative *both* to idealist metaphysics *and* to naturalistic materialism. Certainly, the need for a "return to Kant" did not grow out of the conviction that he had been forgotten, but, in a way, from the very opposite view. Continual reference to Kant had been the cause of distortion of his authentic thought by his followers, who had always emphasized its less valid aspects (thing-in-itself), neglecting more and more his truly valuable contribution (the transcendental). I am here referring to the central thesis of the book by Liebmann, *Kant und die Epigonen*. The author, however, was only joining a larger group of thinkers, which included Benecke,<sup>9</sup> Weisse,<sup>10</sup> Haym,<sup>11</sup> and Zeller,<sup>12</sup> who had shown the same intentions. The rediscovery of the "real" Kant had a twofold meaning: "the real, historical Kant, the essential, meaningful Kant."<sup>13</sup> The twofold nature of this "return to Kant" clearly shows that the need for a historical reconstruction of the real Kant was not limited to a kind of Kantian neoscholasticism, but was in search of a sound point of reference for the "reconstruction of philosophy" in this real Kant.<sup>14</sup> Natorp expressed the attitude shared by a large number of Neo-Kantians, with great clarity: "Kant, who saw philosophy as critique, as method, certainly wished to teach us to philosophize, but not to teach 'one' philosophy. Anyone who understood otherwise would be a bad disciple of Kant!"<sup>15</sup> One could add that, if the first aspect, that is the historical reconstruction and faithful exegesis of Kant's thought, left a great deal to be desired, at least in the initial stages of Neo-Kantianism, a true *Kant-Philologie* only coming into being in the 1880s (with Arnoldt, Adickes, Erdmann, Paulsen, Vaihinger, etc.), as far as the originality and creativity of Neo-Kantian thought is concerned, it is sufficient to take note of the variety and diversity of philosophical work stimulated by the "return to Kant."

However, the "return to Kant" was not merely a warning against the speculative systems of the first half of the nineteenth century, but also, and perhaps even more (or at least more immediately), a rebellion of idealism against the dull naturalistic objectivism of materialism, and an attempt to bring together philosophy and science from a critical stand-

point, as opposed to the arbitrary, superficial theorizings of “vulgar materialism” (*Vulgärmaterialismus*). The protagonists of the first phase of Neo-Kantianism, so-called “physiological” Neo-Kantianism, were scientists (Helmholtz)<sup>16</sup> and philosophers (Lange,<sup>17</sup> Liebmann<sup>18</sup>), who recognized that the real conceptual framework within which to react against materialistic objectivism and empiricism was the correspondence between the theories of Johannes Müller’s *Synnenphysiologie* and Kant’s a priori. If physiology was able to demonstrate that it is not possible to explain all the phenomena of the world and of existence with the properties or movements of matter, without the help of a guiding principle of reason, as Büchner would have us believe, but that it is necessary to have recourse to “innate laws,” peculiar to the psychophysical “organization” of the subject, as presuppositions of every experience of natural objects, and if these results of scientific research corresponded to what philosophy had already stated in the Kantian a priori, then science and philosophy found themselves allies in a critique of objectivism on the basis of a theory of knowledge formulated by philosophy and confirmed by science. “Enquiry into sense perceptions leads us to that knowledge already discovered by Kant: that the proposition ‘No effect without a cause’ is a law of our thought, given before every experience.” Thus Hermann Helmholtz, in his 1855 lecture, *Über das Sehen des Menschen*,<sup>19</sup> lent all the weight of his recognized scientific prestige to the conciliation between philosophy in decline and triumphant science. This pact, continued Helmholtz, can be easily recognized, provided that one compared the recent achievements of science (especially those of Johannes Müller’s physiology) not with “certain new philosophical systems,” but with “the exceptional progress made by philosophy through Kant.”<sup>20</sup> What was seen in Kant then was the model of a well-founded philosophical method, in close contact with science and thus credible (in contrast with the unacceptable speculative constructions of romanticism), but also the departure point for a return to the idealist and subjectivist conception of reality and knowledge, which met with scientific support, for example, in Johannes Müller’s psychophysiology.

If I have dedicated some attention to this early “physiological” phase of Neo-Kantianism, even though it was soon definitively refuted and became obsolete, both as an interpretation of Kant and as a general philosophical conception of knowledge (Cohen’s criticisms were certainly one of the first and most fundamental refutations of this position),<sup>21</sup> my purpose was to point out that it played an important role, despite its inadequacy. It not only contributed to the renewal of German philosophy and to the opposition of idealism and subjectivism to naturalistic objectivism and the empiricism of materialism and positivism,

but also to the resumption by philosophy of the critical function which was correctly recognized to have originated with Kant. The physiological position was basically inadequate because its opposition to naturalistic objectivism, which, in any case, it substantially resembled, was illusory. The psychophysical organization of the knowing subject, which was made to correspond to Kant's a priori, was only an aspect of the natural, objective reality to be established. Subjectivism could no longer be the correct way of refuting materialistic objectivism, or, indeed, discredited metaphysical or only apparent psychophysiological objectivism. However, the antiobjectivist requirement persisted, and it remained part of Cohen's Neo-Kantianism.

Cohen understood the need for abandoning the subjectivism-objectivism alternative, and for finding a new direction which would lead beyond, not only speculative metaphysics and materialism, but also psychophysiological subjectivism. He found the solution in the "return to Kant," that is transcendental philosophy. The opportunity for Cohen to follow this new route was provided by the Trendelenburg-Fischer dispute.

## 2. THE TRENDELENBURG-FISCHER DISPUTE

In 1871, with his essay *Zur Controverse zwischen Trendelenburg und Kuno Fischer*, Cohen intervened in the famous "Homeric"<sup>22</sup> struggle between Trendelenburg and Fischer.<sup>23</sup> In this essay Cohen did not take sides, postponing his confutation of Trendelenburg's thesis to a "more detailed work" (which he had, in fact, already finished writing,<sup>24</sup> and which was to be published in the same year). Having thus avoided the fundamental question: "Did Trendelenburg demonstrate that Kant, in his arguments in favor of the exclusive subjectivity of space and time, had left a gap?" (*SI*: 231),<sup>25</sup> Cohen only examined the controversial aspect of the dispute: "Did Kuno Fischer demonstrate that the gap claimed to exist by Trendelenburg was not, in fact, present in Kant's arguments?" and "Did Trendelenburg demonstrate that Kuno Fischer had introduced non-Kantian elements into his exposition of Kant's theory?" (*SI*: 231).

Cohen's decision in favor of Trendelenburg was influenced by personal reasons, over and above the latter's merits, which are dealt with in detail in the essay. Trendelenburg was a very influential person on the Berlin academic scene, to which Cohen belonged. According to Ollig, the Lazarus/Steinthal group,<sup>26</sup> which included Cohen, and whose journal (*Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*) had published his essay, was closely connected to Trendelenburg. Cohen himself was

influenced by Trendelenburg,<sup>27</sup> who had already praised one of the former's youthful works.<sup>28</sup> However, Cohen had no academic or ideal ties with Fischer. In fact, when he had the opportunity of listening to Fischer's classes, he expressed a very negative view of them.<sup>29</sup>

The occasional nature of this essay would reduce its interest, if it were not for a number of important general considerations. Toward the end, in his discussion of Trendelenburg's and Fischer's methodological ideas about the history of philosophy, Cohen makes some interesting observations.<sup>30</sup> In Cohen's view of the history of philosophy as the history of problems which are investigated with ever increasing depth, their solutions following, one after the other, it is an important task of the historian to separate the new from the old in each author. However, the new—that is the particular author's original contribution to the history of a philosophical problem—can only be discovered if one isolates the "fundamental thought," the "point of origin" (*Springpunkt*), around which all his philosophy is organized.<sup>31</sup> In order to isolate this original nucleus of Kant's thought, "*the historian should be a philosopher*. The historian should not hesitate to place himself between the contending parties" (*SI*: 272). When the interpreter is directly involved in philosophical problems, any claim to interpretative objectivity becomes illusory, if we understand this as the product of a detached, disinterested attitude. Genuine objectivity is rather the product of the meeting between "the possibly impartial assumption of the outsider and one's own rigorous development." It is grounded in the "many-sided, solid" development of subjectivity (cf. *SI*: 272). This is why Fischer's approach to Kant's philosophy, "not from the point of view of an advocate, but only from that of a writer of history of philosophy (*philosophischer Geschichtsschreiber*),"<sup>32</sup> is mistaken. It is only by starting from present problems that a *critical* study of history is possible:

So if an age allows itself to be dominated by the trend of history, it will soon find its full satisfaction in the fulfilment of this trend, and the longer this state of affairs lasts, the less will it be affected by the question: what will be?, and even less by the even more urgent question: what *must* be? But these levers of the future are, at the same time, the gages of the past. The historical link with the old must only be established with what in the old was also the new, and only in this regard will historical knowledge of the old come about. We are still closely tied to the new in this sense, and we must take its side as advocates of truth, if our result is to be real history. (*SI*: 274–75)<sup>33</sup>

Now, in the case of Kant, what is the "new," the "*Springpunkt*," the "fundamental, effective thought" (*wirksame Grundgedanke*) (*SI*: 270), which

will act as a starting point? What philosophical approach must the researcher adopt in order to be able to understand Kant? To what present philosophical need does Kant offer an answer? Cohen's answer is clear: "If one does not adopt the critical approach in philosophy, in historical exposition, he will not be able to avoid rebuking *Kant* himself for his 'a priori magic,' his 'fantastic concepts' and other like objectivities, supplying the corresponding information" (*SI*: 272). However, the development of this keypoint was postponed to the future "more detailed work." Despite this, it already seems clear that Cohen did not view the dispute between Trendelenburg and Fischer as being restricted to Kant's conception of space and time, but as covering "all the efforts of philosophical investigation" (*SI*: 229). What is at stake here is the choice between gnoseological subjectivism and objectivism: "Is the nature of things grounded in the conditions of our mind? Or must and *can* our thought be confirmed by the law of nature? The question of the meaning and value of Kant's theory of space and time can be valid as another expression for the question of the principles of knowledge" (*SI*: 229). Furthermore, the very conception of philosophy is at stake: "But one can start off from the physiology of the senses, or from pure psychology, from metaphysics in its ancient meaning, or from *that* metaphysics which is known as the theoretical science of nature. Anyone who does not feel at home in Kant's *Transcendental Aesthetic* will lose his bearings at speculative crossroads" (*SI*: 230).

If philosophy, once it has abandoned the speculative illusion of embracing all theoretical knowledge, including the sciences, is inclined to challenge the claim of the positive sciences to confine it to a "psychological (Mach, Avenarius) or conventionalist (Poincaré) foundation of the exact sciences,"<sup>34</sup> or to an irrational *Weltanschauung* (Fechner, Haym, Strauss, Lotze),<sup>35</sup> or to reduce it, as historicism would like to, to mere history of philosophy,<sup>36</sup> if philosophy wishes to rise up again as a science among sciences, it must begin again from the function of transcendental theory of knowledge given to it by Kant, from the "clearcut boundary line [. . .] drawn by Kant for all future metaphysics, and *thus for all psychology*" (*SI*: 229), it must recover its fundamental, essential, critical character.

### 3. THE FIRST EDITION OF *KANTS THEORIE DER ERFAHRUNG*

The study of Kant, announced by Cohen, soon appeared and represented a decisive stage in the evolution of his thought, but also a turning point in the history of the interpretation of Kant. The work went ahead rapidly. In a letter, probably dating from mid-July 1870, Cohen

wrote: "I am getting on with my writing. The whole thing is there alive in my head; it just has to be put down in writing."<sup>37</sup> Cohen approached Kant's thought following the hermeneutic principles already set out. On August 2, 1870, he wrote to his friend Hermann Lewandowsky: "My Kant is there facing me, and I am trying to penetrate his gaze. It is a fine thing to enter the mind of such a man, and observe all possible developments from his point of view."<sup>38</sup> At last, in the previously quoted letter dated October 3, 1870, Cohen was able to announce that the work had been completed. Cohen's decision to take on the role of "advocate" of Kant frequently led him to formulate his interpretation as a "metacritique" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> v), that is as a critique of the criticisms of Kant. Cohen himself recognized that this was not only a controversial stance, but that it really corresponded to the route he had followed in his rediscovery of Kant:

My aim in this book was to establish Kant's theory of apriority on a new basis. My conviction that it was true did not grow directly out of my reading of Kant's works. It developed and was consolidated, rather, during my battle against the attacks to which it had been subjected. Like most young people who dedicate themselves to the study of philosophy, I too had been accustomed to the idea that Kant had become outdated, that he now belonged to history. Thus, when the idea that those attacks left Kant unscathed first came to me, I was inclined to believe current opinion and put this idea aside. However, the more I immersed myself, to the best of my abilities, in the opinions which were the cause of those negative judgments, the more tenacious that doubt became. Nevertheless, I thought it incredible that Kant, to whom everyone wishes to trace their origins, could be understood in a different way, in a fundamentally, essentially different way, from that in which those who are leaders in the field interpret and teach him [. . .]. But I felt the urgent need to present the historical Kant again, and to defend him from his opponents in his genuine physiognomy, as far as I was able to understand it. In this drudgery (literally "cart driver's job" *Kärmerarbeit*), which I enjoyed, I became more and more aware, as it proceeded, that his opponents had not really got to grips with Kant as he appears in the documents; that their conception could be confuted simply by making quotations. (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> iii-iv)

Cohen's letters also contain, in connection with the development of his new interpretation of Kant, frequent criticisms of Kant's interpreters.<sup>39</sup>

Cohen's first idea for the title was to include in it the subjects dealt with: *Raum und Zeit im Zusammenhange der Kantischen Metaphysik und Psychologie, ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Kantischen Idealismus*<sup>40</sup> (later Cohen was to widen the scope of the work, also taking into consideration transcendental logic, and, as a consequence: "the title will probably be:

"*Raum, Zeit und Kategorien etc.*"<sup>41</sup>). In the end, however, Cohen chose to state Kant's "fundamental thought" directly in the title, since it was around this that he intended to build up his interpretation: the *Critique of Pure Reason* is, in essence, the "Kantian theory of experience" (*Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*): Kant's critical idealism is above all a new theory of experience.

Although I do not intend to provide the reader with a complete description of the contents of this work here, I am obliged to refer to some of the fundamental aspects of Cohen's interpretation of Kant, so as to highlight the object of my research: the meaning of critical philosophy for Cohen in this phase of the development of his thought. As Mariano Campo has rightly pointed out, the type of interpretation of Kant carried out by Cohen "is now common knowledge, and it can be found in all textbooks. However, one should not forget Cohen's contribution to making it obvious, including his trimming of the thick forest of the debate over Kant's legacy."<sup>42</sup>

As is well known, faced with the classical problem of whether our representations are innate (Leibniz) or acquired (Hume), Kant reformulated it in an entirely novel way: "There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. . . . But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience."<sup>43</sup> "In these words experience is propounded (*aufgegeben*) as an enigma. The solution to this enigma is the content of Kant's philosophy. *Kant discovered a new conception of experience*" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 3). Experience cannot be considered to be a "datum," in the empiricist meaning of a "prolix series of perceptions" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 7), facing which the subject is purely passive: "On the contrary the object is given only because it is intuited" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 15–6). Kant's "Copernican Revolution" confirms the principle that the necessary, universal character of knowledge as a science derives from the fact that it "*produces its experience*" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 12), i.e.: "we can know a priori of things only what we ourselves put into them."<sup>44</sup> Thus, the task of critical philosophy is an investigation of a priori elements of experience.

Kant began by considering space, which, in our mind, precedes every sensation and "is at the base" of outer phenomena. This, according to Cohen, is the *first degree* of the Kantian a priori: the *a priori as primary origin* (*Ursprünglichkeit*) (cf. *KTE*<sup>1</sup> 88). Therefore, the discovery of the a priori came about in Kant through a reflection on a "fact" of consciousness. However, this psychological method led to an initial result that is not psychological, but metaphysical. The a priori is characterized, not as "initial" (*anfänglich*) as regards experience, but as "originative"; it is what "is at the base" of outer phenomena.



Nevertheless, with this result, transcendental investigation had not even begun. If empirical consciousness isolates space as an originaive element in its own experience, it does not justify its apriority for this reason, nor will it ever be able to do so by means of an empirical psychological procedure. Demonstrating the "possibility" of the apriority of space is the task of transcendental investigation:

If a type of knowledge is called transcendental inasmuch as a priori it must be possible, then the a priori itself is indicated as possible only inasmuch as it is known in a type of transcendental knowledge. And this is truly how it is. The knowledge that a concept is a priori is called *metaphysical* by Kant. This metaphysical knowledge can, however, only come about empirically, by consulting inner experience. . . . In what sense, though, this a priori is *possible*—only this manner of knowledge is transcendental. (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 36)

Thus, the transcendental question concerns the possibility of the a priori, not its existence. As regards space, it can be formulated as follows: "How is it possible for such a *pure* intuition, an intuition within ourselves, to provide a priori concepts of objects?" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 37). Kant's answer, in the *Transcendental Exposition of the Concept of Space*, is well known: "Manifestly, not otherwise than in so far as the intuition has its seat in the subject only, as the formal character of the subject, in virtue of which, in being affected by objects, it obtains *immediate representation*, that is, *intuition*, of them; and only in so far, therefore, as it is merely the form of outer *sense* in general."<sup>45</sup>

This, in Cohen's view, is the *second degree* of the a priori: the *a priori as form* (cf. *KTE*<sup>1</sup> 90). Kant's concept of 'form' should be, however, precisely defined, to avoid the mistaken interpretation of it as "organ," which had weighed heavily on the interpretation of Kant. As is well known, Herbart had criticized the Kantian concept of "a priori form," understood as a hypostatized organ, countering it with his own theory of psychic processes.<sup>46</sup> This mistaken conception of form did not elude the difficulties of innateness. Several of Kant's interpreters had identified the a priori with the innate. Cohen, on the contrary, also intended to avoid the high degree of subjectivism which had characterized physiological Kantian interpretations (Helmholtz, Lange, etc.), which, precisely on the basis of the identification of the a priori with the psychophysical organization of the subject, intended to counter materialist objectivism. Finally, the subjectivist interpretation of the a priori would not be able to elude Trendelenburg's objections. Thus, with his interpretation of Kantian form, Cohen went to the heart of the disputes over Kant and established the basis for the new interpretation of the Kantian concept of 'experience.'

Kant distinguished between form and matter solely with reference to the phenomenon. These concepts are, thus, in no way to be hypostatized, but, quite the opposite, to be considered correlative with reference to knowledge (cf. *KTE*<sup>1</sup> 44). The form of intuition is, therefore, for Kant, "the very act of intuition" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 46), being considered independently of its content; so much so that he also called it "pure intuition."

However, if form for Kant is always form of the phenomenon, pure form is an abstraction, and transcendental investigation cannot stop at this point, without running the risk of a subjectivist conception of the a priori, which will not be able to account for the objectivity of knowledge, as Trendelenburg argued. But Kant's authentic "Copernican" turning point consisted in demonstrating that the objectivity of knowledge is assured precisely on the basis of the subjective a priori. To reach this, however, Kant had to render explicit a *third degree* of the meaning of the a priori: the *a priori as a formal condition of the possibility of our experience* (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 93). With this last and fuller meaning of the a priori, all accusations of subjectivism or adherence to innateness were overcome: "Space is an a priori intuition, after this clarification, now means: space is a *constitutive condition of experience*. It does not appear a priori because it is innate, but appears innate because it is an a priori condition of possible experience" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 94).

In this way the "enigma" of experience began to find a solution. First of all, transcendental investigation does not deduce experience from a priori forms, but on them founds "possible experience," or rather "the possibility of experience." Thus we are dealing with a formal, not an ontological, foundation. Second, however, experience is thought of as the set of phenomena, and not as things in themselves, outside and independent of the subject. Thus the "formality" of transcendental justification is not an empty but a ground breaking formality: "The a priori is only conceivable in the form, and the form only with reference to the phenomenon. Thus the a priori now builds up an experience, which desires nothing more than to be *a combination of phenomena*. The foundation of that new type of idealism founded by Kant, and deduced by him from the theory of space and time, resides in the a priori" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 58).

This is transcendental idealism, founded on the empirical reality and transcendental ideality of space and time.

However, this meaning of the a priori cannot be totally understood within the context of the *transcendental aesthetic*, since what is missing is an investigation of the act of "synthesis," which alone constitutes experience, and of the categories, the a priori conditions of the unity of the synthesis (cf. *KTE*<sup>1</sup> 81, 98). Therefore, Cohen greatly emphasized the complementary nature of the *transcendental aesthetic* and the *transcendental logic*, showing that he opposed the widespread trend of his time,

which favored the *aesthetic* in Kant's *Critique*. Cohen believed that the *aesthetic* needed to be complemented by the *logic*, partly because the theory of the empirical reality and transcendental ideality of space and time is not sufficiently well grounded without clarification of the difference between phenomenon and noumenon, and the limitation of the noumenon to its negative meaning, which can only take place within the *logic*.

Cohen also returned, for the apriority of the categories, to the Kantian distinction between metaphysical and transcendental meanings. First of all, they were inferred by psychological-logical means<sup>47</sup> from the Table of Judgments, as "primary concepts of understanding,"<sup>48</sup> and this enabled Cohen to demonstrate that Kant had already resolved the a priori forms in psychic processes, as required by Herbart. However, this first step, had to be overcome by further investigation, in transcendental deduction, highlighting their character as formal conditions of possible experience, since they are conditions of the synthesis. By emphasizing the formal character of the a priori, Cohen concentrated its meaning in the concept of 'synthesis': "The synthesis is the common tie, which guarantees the same apriority, in the forms of intuiting and thinking" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 104–5). Thus, Kant's intention was not to build up a closed system of the a priori with his table of categories. The categories are formal conditions of possible experience; that is, they establish experience in respect of its formal possibility, not its content. Since the formal possibility of experience consists in the synthetic unity of the manifold in it, the meaning of the categories is resolved in their function as unity of the synthesis:

For our conception, the essential point of the a priori lies, solely, in the fact that it contains the formal condition of experience. As a consequence we only uphold "*synthetic unity in the connection of the manifold*" as an a priori category. For experience in general is not possible without this. By means of it, the "rhapsody of perceptions" becomes "synthetic unity of the phenomena." *This is the reason why we uphold, not so much the apriority of the categories, but that of the category. . . .* For the single categories are a priori altogether, even if they might not be necessary forms of thought in their logical capacity, *inasmuch as they contain a synthetic unity in the connection of the manifold.*" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 101)

In the above context, Cohen's conclusion that the apriority of the categories is nothing other than the synthetic unity of apperception is wholly coherent:

Although not a Kantian expression, it can be in the spirit of Kant to observe: how space is the form for outer intuition and time that for inner intuition; thus transcendental apperception is the *form for the categories*. Self-consciousness is the transcendental condition under which we pro-

duce the pure concepts of understanding. Synthetic unity is the form which, as a common element, is at the base of all the single types of unity thought in the categories. (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 144)

In this way the "transcendental self" also entirely loses its ontological or anthropological character and turns into a pure "transcendental form," the constitutive condition of the possibility of experience (cf. *KTE*<sup>1</sup> 141, 184), while the content of the synthesis is "given" in the inner sense. Only through the distinction and correlation in the synthesis between transcendental and empirical apperception is it possible to formulate a "healthy psychology" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 146, 164).

The very transcendental character of the a priori forms of sensibility and understanding, which has been clarified up to this point, implies that the separation of the two "sources" of knowledge be regarded as the result of an abstraction. Transcendental investigation starts from the fact of experience as a synthesis of the phenomena, only to return to the a priori conditions of the possibility of such a synthesis in sensibility and understanding, which therefore co-operate in the foundation of experience. Thus, after separate analysis of the two sources, they must be joined together in the construction of experience; inner sense being the intermediary: "The a priori form of space: a chimera, which does not combine with the pure forms of understanding in the synthesis of the phenomena, of which experience above all consists for us! However, this synthesis - and this is where we reach the most important point, where the inseparability of logic from aesthetics becomes clear - this synthesis is only possible in the *inner sense*" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 84).

Thus, in the *Analytic of Principles*, and in the theory of schematism, the true meaning of the transcendental a priori is finally given full expression. The transcendental method, whose point of departure is the fact of experience and whose aim is to find the a priori conditions of its possibility, does not allow any misunderstanding about the pre-eminence of the transcendental over the metaphysical a priori, and thus of the principles over the judgments and categories:

Now the sense of metaphysical deduction will no longer be misinterpreted. The pure forms of thought are not intended to be discovered a priori! Our intent is to discover the necessary forms of given experience. Our path will not lead to them, but will take them as its point of departure. As is very well known, it is not by proceeding from the category of causality that we establish through it the second analogy of experience. Our question, rather, concerns the possibility of the latter. What is available to us is the synthetic *principle*, which, together with those similar to it, must be clari-

fied. This procedure is indeed clearly indicated in the Prolegomena, but also in the Critique. (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 206-7)

#### 4. COHEN AND THE DISPUTES OVER THE INTERPRETATION OF KANT

The “new foundation” of the Kantian a priori, discussed above in its essential outline, allowed Cohen to formulate decisive answers to some problems and objections concerning Kant brought up by his interpreters. It should not be forgotten that Cohen began his interpretation of Kant with the intention of contributing to the “restoration (*Wiederaufrichtung*) of Kant’s authority” (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> vi), against the mistakes and objections of the latter’s interpreters and critics.

First, Cohen was finally able to reply to Trendelenburg’s objections; the reply which in his essay on the dispute between Trendelenburg and Fischer had been postponed. The new theory of Kant’s experience now invalidated the problem of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in the terms in which it had been posited by Trendelenburg. The way proposed by the latter—to consider space and time both subjective and objective forms, and thus to presuppose harmony between subject and object, which would ensure the objective value of knowledge<sup>49</sup>—had not been neglected by Kant (as Trendelenburg argued), but rejected and overcome with the new meaning of the a priori. Experience is a priori synthesis of the phenomena for Kantian transcendental idealism, and the principle of this synthesis is that “the conditions of the *possibility of experience* in general are likewise conditions of the *possibility of the objects of experience*, and that for this reason they have objective value in a synthetic a priori judgment.”<sup>50</sup> The objectivity of knowledge consists of its necessity and its universality, which are founded exactly by the a priori in the subject: “we can know a priori of things only what we ourselves put into them.”<sup>51</sup> The subjective character of space and time thus did not leave a “gap”<sup>52</sup> in the Kantian theory of knowledge, since it is precisely, in its transcendental meaning, the formal condition of the possibility of experience and of its objectivity: “The transcendental question does not regard the possibility of an a priori intuition, in the sense of an intuition *prior* to the objects; but at the same time of such an intuition that ‘the *concept* of the latter (i.e. of the objects) can be *determined* a priori in it.’ The a priori, whose possibility as a type of knowledge the transcendental question concerns, does not simply precede objects, but constructs them” (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 48-9).

A further problem of interpretation, extensively dealt with by Cohen in the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, was the question of the discovery and justification of the a priori. While Herbart, as we have already seen, believed that it was necessary to recognize a psychological foundation for the a priori, but criticized Kant for his conception of the a priori as a faculty of the soul, Fries complained that Kant had rejected a psychological foundation. In this criticism he was joined by Beneke and Schopenhauer, while Helmholtz and Lange interpreted Kant's a priori in psychophysiological terms. Besides, a well-established tradition in the interpretation of Kant, which began with Reinhold and through the idealists reached Ulrici and Fischer, was of the opinion that the a priori should be discovered and justified exclusively through deduction, without turning to experience at all. A schematic view could reduce the problem to the question of whether the discovery and justification of the a priori comes about in turn a priori or a posteriori. Then the book by Jürgen Bona Meyer, *Kants Psychologie*,<sup>53</sup> which emphasized this contrast and followed the line taken by Fries, had been published in 1870.

His investigation of the transcendental meaning of the a priori, and of the relationship between metaphysical and transcendental deduction, allowed Cohen to take up an exact position on this subject. First, he rejected the thesis of the a priori discovery of the a priori. The very first words of the *Critique of Pure Reason*—"There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience"—exclude any interpretation of this kind. The consequence of Kant's transcendental method is that the departure point of any investigation will always be experience. Fischer,<sup>54</sup> argued that if one admits that the categories are the object of a psychological investigation, then they are made objects of experience and cannot be necessary and universal, thus raising a difficulty that derived solely from confusion between "empirical knowledge" and "knowledge of the empirical."<sup>55</sup> The a priori is to be discovered by "psychological thought, or, to use Kant's terminology, the Analytic of Concepts" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 120), which does not identify objects of experience, but the conditions of its possibility; psychological thought, therefore, which discovers metaphysical concepts. Cohen considered this misunderstanding of Kant particularly serious, since this disregard of the transcendental method forced speculative idealism to accept intellectual intuition, radically distorting the meaning of transcendental idealism: "But this is really incredible: that Kant could be so completely misunderstood! The a priori is *discovered* not only in the concepts, but above all in sensibility. In this way *intellectual* intuition becomes impossible" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 243).

When elucidating the role of metaphysical deduction, Cohen underlined its complementarity with psychological discovery. Empirical deduction prepares the way for metaphysical deduction. On the one hand, the investigation can only *begin* with experience; on the other, thought cannot reach the a priori if it remains within the area of experience; *thought* is a necessary stage between psychology and metaphysics:

Metaphysical deduction, which shows the a priori in the forms of consciousness as well as in spatial representations, or in the functions of unity in judgments, makes empirical deduction appear to be a "waste of time." . . . But this proposition should not be misunderstood. Metaphysical deduction certainly presupposes empirical deduction, i.e. psychological reflection . . . in metaphysical deduction, correctly considered, it is only the concept of empirical deduction that is enhanced: through comprehension of the difference between the constitutive parts of experience. (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 121–22)

However, Cohen did not entirely accept the views of Fries and Meyer. If the a priori is discovered by empirical means, it cannot be justified by the same means. The a priori is not justified up to the point of being left with its originative metaphysical meaning, and even less so in its psychological meaning. Only in transcendental deduction can it find its full meaning, and its full justification as the "formal condition of the possibility of our experience." Cohen accused Meyer of having reduced the transcendental to the psychological, following the lead of Fries (cf. *KTE*<sup>1</sup> 123). Transcendental logic is not only an "unusual name" with which Kant "baptized" empirico-psychological induction:<sup>56</sup> "No! It is not simply the 'unusual name,' but it is the unprecedented thing which was born under that name: that the forms found in empirical thought are not simply psychological categories, but the *gnoseological conditions (erkenntnisstheoretisch) of the possibility of experience*" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 124).

Finally, concerning the problem of the thing in itself, the classic problem in Kantian interpretation, Cohen limited himself, in the work under review, to a minimal, reductivist conception, which was certainly unsatisfactory, but was to be further developed and extended in successive works. In the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, Cohen restricted his considerations to the "noumenon in the negative sense." Here he demonstrated how critical philosophy excludes once and for all both the object in itself and the subject in itself, thus radically opposing empirical materialism and idealism (cf. *KTE*<sup>1</sup> 82, 246ff.). Even the Kantian 'idea,' which was to play a crucial role in the further development of Cohen's idealism, was only treated in its negative sense in the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*. "The result of the Transcendental Aesthetic was the noumenon as a limiting concept. 'The

theory of sensibility is at the same time the theory of the noumenon in the negative sense.' Something similar can be said of the Transcendental Logic: the theory of the categories is at the same time the theory of ideas in the negative sense" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 269).

It is certainly not by chance that one of the most important additions Cohen made to the second edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* was precisely the development of the role and meaning of the idea. By that time he had arrived at a more mature, detailed standpoint on critical idealism, through further important reflection, which even went beyond Kant.

## 5. KANT'S CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Before singling out the characteristics of critical philosophy as they emerge from the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, for this was my objective in summarizing its contents, I am obliged to begin with the consideration that his first Kantian interpretation is not the best place to identify Cohen's conception of critical philosophy. This work only examined the *Critique of Pure Reason*, not the whole Kantian critical system. Even within the first *Critique*, the whole of the *transcendental dialectic* was practically ignored (except for the chapter on the antinomies, which, however, only treated them with reference to spatio-temporal problems, rather than those of ideas). As we have already seen, in the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, Cohen's principal aim was to intervene in contemporary disputes over the *transcendental aesthetic* and the theory of the a priori, rather than to develop the potential of critical philosophy as a whole.

It has already been noted that Cohen had originally intended to entitle his essay: *Raum, Zeit, und Kategorien im Zusammenhang der Kantischen Metaphysik und Psychologie, ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des kritischen Idealismus*. However, in the previously quoted letter to Hermann Lewandowsky, dated October 3, 1870, where Cohen announced the completion of his essay on Kant, we have documentary proof that he had deliberately not gone into critical idealism in depth:

I am not going to write the last chapter on critical idealism, because, otherwise, I would have to present my program. The chapter can be my next work. The present essay goes no further than the defense of Kant, opposing the main attacks on him. Don't you see my point? What I have done is to illustrate the meaning of the theory of space and time for Kantian psychology and metaphysics and examine the objections against it. That is enough. What further meaning Kant's idealism may have and what its rela-



tionship is with that of Plato, Descartes and Spinoza, what influence it ought to have on present day philosophy, what direction idealism has followed in modern natural science; these are all very fine things, but they are not strictly relevant to this theme, and since, otherwise, I would burn my mouth (*ich mir den Mund daran verbrennen*), I am going to restrict myself to this.<sup>57</sup>

The following points clearly emerge from these few lines: 1) Cohen was of the opinion that his essay on Kant's theory of experience responded to the needs which gave rise to it, and that it justified itself even though restricted to the "defense of Kant, opposing the main attacks on him"; 2) he believed that, in order to approach the theme of critical idealism, without the risk of "burning his mouth," Kant's thought had to be included in a wider-ranging critical tradition (Plato, Descartes and Spinoza),<sup>58</sup> and the influence of Kantian idealism "on present day philosophy" and its application to "modern natural science" evaluated: it was these two needs that were to prove decisive for the orientation of Cohen's thought in the years that followed, and were to lead to interesting, new developments in his interpretation of Kant and his conception of critical philosophy; 3) Cohen was aware of the fact that further, satisfactory investigation of critical idealism would have required him to present his own philosophical program ("because, otherwise, I would have to present my program"). This third point is especially interesting. Here Cohen showed that he was conscious of the fact that an interpreter of Kant had to go beyond Kant, if he wanted to bring out the full consequences of critical idealism. Cohen was certainly not inhibited by scholastic-type scruples. Rather, on the one hand, he was aware that, to go beyond Kant, he would have to expand his historical knowledge, by exploring the thought of other philosophers more deeply (his studies of Plato and Leibniz were to be decisive, as we shall see) and investigate the critical role of philosophy as regards the natural sciences. On the other hand, though he himself had formulated the principle that—"it is impossible to express any judgment on Kant, without, on every line, betraying the world which one has in his own head" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> v), he seemed to want to restrict the contribution of the individual interpreter—to place greater emphasis on the need to "present the historical Kant again, and to defend him from his opponents in his genuine physiognomy, as far as I was able to understand it" (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> iv). He felt the need, then, on the one hand, to restrict himself to the reconstruction of the historical Kant, while, on the other, he was aware of not being ready to approach the theme of critical idealism in all its aspects.<sup>59</sup> Both these reasons originated in Cohen's conviction that an exhaustive analysis of critical idealism could not remain within the confines of a pure reinterpretation of

Kant. Bearing in mind this proviso, it is, nevertheless, possible to analyze the characteristics of critical philosophy as they emerge from the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*.

The first, fundamental characteristic of critical philosophy is the *transcendental method*. For Cohen this method was the everlasting legacy of Kant's philosophy. This conviction was to remain unchanged, not only in the whole of Cohen's thought, but also in that of his school.<sup>60</sup> The transcendental method is the methodological consequence of the above-mentioned Kantian principle, according to which "all our knowledge begins with experience, but it does not follow that it all arises out of experience." Philosophy, like all knowledge, must start off from experience; however, it must investigate the conditions of the possibility of experience, and these cannot be found within experience itself. In this way, critical philosophy overcomes both dogmatism, whose analytic method proves to be insufficient for the foundation of knowledge which goes beyond concepts and includes the phenomena, and empiricism, which by limiting itself to the field of experience is unable to grasp the latter's a priori conditions. The transcendental method can be schematically presented under three fundamental headings: 1) Philosophy must take the "fact" of experience as its starting point; 2) it must return to the a priori conditions of this fact; 3) the meaning of the a priori lies wholly in its function as the formal condition of possible experience.

First, the reflective character of philosophical thought, which requires its starting point to be a "fact," is the lesson which critical philosophy draws from empiricism, and which opposes it to all purely speculative and deductive metaphysics. As we have seen, all claims that the a priori is also "discovered" a priori are incompatible with critical philosophy. Philosophy acquires the value of scientific knowledge only inasmuch as it is a reflection on science. As a matter of fact, in the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, the identification of Kantian "experience" with natural science, which Cohen was to underline in the works that followed, though still "latent,"<sup>61</sup> does come through.<sup>62</sup> In the works that followed, Cohen was also to use the transcendental method for critical reflection on cultural areas outside natural science (moral sciences, art, and religion) and was to continually recall the need to take a "fact" as the point of departure, in order to investigate its a priori conditions, even though the scientific nature of the fact was not always obvious.

Second, if philosophical knowledge must begin with experience, it must, however, identify the *nonempirical* principles of its possibility. This allows critical philosophy to go beyond empiricism and skepticism. The route for the a priori is, as we have already seen, reflection on experience with the aim of identifying its formal principles. This route, which is explicit in the *transcendental aesthetic*, where the point of departure for

the identification of its a priori forms is sensibility, is hidden in the *transcendental logic*, where Kant proceeds from the judgments to the categories, ending up with the principles. Cohen re-established the primary role of the principles, reversing the order of succession of the logical a priori:

So now we can present the progress of the Kantian system. First of all the question on the *principles* (*Grund-sätze*) was posed. Their number was unknown, but their apriority was deemed to be present in the concepts alone. Therefore, subsequently, fundamental *concepts* (*Grund-begriffe*) were admitted. If an exhaustive compendium had to be achieved for the former, in the case of the latter such a compendium needed to be created. Thus he reached the Table of Judgments, and, from there, the table of fundamental concepts and principles he was looking for. (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 209–10)

Third and finally, the a priori must in no way be hypostatized, either in a metaphysical substance or in an organ or faculty of human physiological structure. The particular attention which Cohen devoted to the difference between metaphysical and transcendental deduction allows a rigorous definition of the purely functional or “formal” meaning of the a priori. If the a priori is understood, in the transcendental sense, as a formal condition of experience,

experience itself becomes a concept, which we must build up in pure intuition and pure thought. The formal conditions of its possibility, space, time and synthetic unity, now count as a priori, because we *build up experience* with them, because they are the formal constituents of experience. Now it is no longer necessary for the formal foundation of the possibility to be innate even for spatial intuition. Space is a priori, because it is a formal condition of experience. We are not at all concerned about whether it be innate or not. We build up a concept of experience as synthetic unity of experiences, according to transcendental principles. What we need for the creation of this synthetic unity, these necessary *constructive elements*, we call a priori. (*KTE*<sup>1</sup> 104)<sup>63</sup>

It is from this single mistake, the hypostatization of the a priori, that the ontological and psychophysiological interpretations of Kant derive. Critical philosophy must rigorously maintain a purely functional definition of the a priori itself.

Kant's critical philosophy had, then, a second meaning for Cohen, consisting in the conception of knowledge as synthesis. By giving sensibility a position of full respect within knowledge, Kant went over the limit common to intellectualism and sensualism, that is the unbridgeable separation between subject and object. With the well known Kantian theory of the empirical reality and transcendental ideality of

space and time and the necessary addition of the negative meaning of the noumenon, critical theory finally abandoned ontology and presented itself as transcendental idealism. The distinction between and complementarity of sensibility and understanding, inner sense and transcendental apperception, phenomenon and law, are the basis of the possibility of experience. It is this new concept of experience that sums up the originality of Kantian critical philosophy. What differentiates transcendental idealism from empirical idealism is the fact that the a priori does not only consist in the concepts of understanding, but also in the forms of sensibility; indeed "*the very synthesis of understanding requires an apriority of intuition!*" (KTE<sup>1</sup> 163). Therefore, transcendental idealism is "formal idealism,"<sup>64</sup> and thus empirical realism: "The category alone does not make the object; sensible intuition must be added. And the latter has exactly the same rights to be a formal condition of experience. It is formal idealism which differentiates transcendental from empirical idealism and makes empirical realism of it" (KTE<sup>1</sup> 244-45).

Therefore, transcendental method and formal idealism are the two qualifying characteristics of Kantian philosophy: "Thus, transcendental idealism is completed and confirmed in the theory of the negative noumenon, critically according to the method, formally according to the content" (KTE<sup>1</sup> 252). In the further development of Cohen's thought, these two aspects of critical philosophy were to evolve differently. While the transcendental method was to maintain a central role, the complementarity of understanding and sensibility in knowledge was to be abandoned by reducing sensibility to understanding and increasing the role of pure thought. In the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, however, these two aspects were still undivided, as inseparable characteristics of critical philosophy.

What was missing in Cohen's first Kantian interpretation was the systematic meaning of critical philosophy, which could not be approached without taking into consideration all three of Kant's *Critiques*. Above all the problem of the "limit" in critical philosophy was not dealt with. The fact, which has already been mentioned, that Cohen limited consideration of the noumenon to its negative meaning, and the absence of an analysis of the positive meaning of the Kantian idea (which was to be rectified in the works that followed) explain the failure of the meaning of critical philosophy to develop in this sense and thus require that further investigation of critical idealism which Cohen had postponed to a later stage in his reflections. Therefore, the definition of idealism which concludes the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*—"To resolve the diversity between things into distinctions between ideas: this is the secret of idealism" (KTE<sup>1</sup> 270)—required further investigation to acquire its full critical meaning.