

On the role of Kant in Cohen's early work

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The received view

- Edel, Geert (1988): *Von der Vernunftkritik zur Erkenntnislogik. Die Entwicklung der theoretischen Philosophie Hermann Cohens*. Freiburg: Alber, p. 64
- Holzhey, Helmut & Röd, Wolfgang (2004): *Die Philosophie des ausgehenden 19. und des 20. Jahrhunderts 2. Neukantianismus, Idealismus, Realismus, Phänomenologie*. München: Verlag C.H. Beck, p. 44
- Köhnke, Klaus Christian (1986): *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus. Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie zwischen Idealismus und Positivismus*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, p. 282.
- Lembeck, Karl-Heinz (1994): *Platon in Marburg : Platon-Rezeption und Philosophiegeschichtsphilosophie bei Cohen und Natorp*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, pp. 22-30.
- Poma, Andrea (1997): *The critical philosophy of Hermann Cohen (La filosofia critica di Hermann Cohen)*. Translated by John Denton. Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, p. 22.
- Schmidt, Winrich de (1976): *Psychologie und Transzendentalphilosophie. Zur Psychologie-Rezeption bei Hermann Cohen und Paul Natorp* (1. Aufl. Aufl.). Bonn: Bouvier, pp. 29-34.

Cohen, [...] dessen **Frühschriften sämtlich völkerpsychologischen Inhalts** gewesen waren, [hatte 1871] nicht nur endgültig die psychologische Kantinterpretation verworfen, sondern befand sich bereits auf dem Weg zu einem eigenen System der Philosophie. Dieser **Umbruch seines Denkens erfolgte innerhalb nur eines Jahres** [...] [Der] zwischen Trendelenburg und Fischer geführte Streit um die Subjektivität und/oder Objektivität des Apriorischen [brachte ihn] [...] auf den Gedanken [...], daß das Apriorische weder auf ein rein Objektives noch auf ein ebenso rein Subjektives gegründet werden dürfe, solle jegliche Wahrheit nicht entweder zu einem nur psychologisch erforschbaren und empirisch aufweisbaren Relativen oder aber zu einem materialistischen Dogma werden, das die Erkenntnisproblematik ganz außer acht lasse. (Köhnke 1986, 282f)

Cohen's **previous writings** [i.e., his writings before the Plato essay from 1878] **show his attachment to the *Völkerpsychologie* of Lazarus and Steinthal. These writings, therefore, deal with problems unrelated to critical idealism and posit theses that were either to be abandoned or considerably modified from the 1878 onward.** [...] If we want to see matters in a correct historical perspective and have a clearer theoretical idea of Cohen's thought, it is better to think of ***Die platonische Ideenlehre psychologisch entwickelt* as a youthful work, which was superseded to all intents and purposes by his later studies, and which is of negligible interest from the standpoint of critical idealism.** [...] *Die platonische Ideenlehre psychologisch entwickelt* [...] **was conceived and written entirely under the influence of the idea of the shared identity of philosophy and psychology that characterizes Cohen's early thought.** (Poma 1997, 22)

„[...] in seinen Jugendschriften [hat] Cohen zunächst eine ganz **der herbartisierenden Psychologie H. Steinthals verpflichtete systematische Konzeption vertreten**, die **Überzeugung von der ‚Wahrheit‘ der Kantischen Lehre dagegen [hat er] erst später und, wie er selbst gesteht, nach einer Periode des Zweifels gewonnen [...]**“ (Edel 1988, p. 64)

Cohens **Arbeiten der 1860er Jahre stehen auf dem Boden der zeitgenössischen Psychologie**. [...] sein Interesse gilt [der psychologischen Analyse], d.h. dem Rückgang auf den psychologischen *Ursprung* aller Kulturerscheinungen im menschlichen Bewußtsein. Das zeigt schon die These seiner [...] Dissertation, daß **aller Fortschritt der Philosophie in der Psychologie angesiedelt sei**. (Holzhey 2004, 44)

1. Before 1871 (Köhnke) or 1878 (Poma, Edel) Cohen has been under the influence of the folk psychology of Lazarus and Steinthal
2. In this early period Kant did not play a significant role for Cohen
3. Instead, Cohen defended a certain variety of „psychologism,“ insofar as he took psychology to be *the* method of philosophy
4. Later on, however, Cohen abandoned his early views, who therefore are not too important for our understanding of Cohen's mature writings

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Kant is crucial already before 1871

- The narrative of „critical idealism“ which is crucial to Cohen’s later philosophy can already be found in Cohen’s Plato essay from 1866
- Moreover, in this essay, Cohen identifies Kant as the very philosopher who finally overcame the „mythical expression“ of Plato’s philosophy of ideas
- The very same motive of Kant as the finisher (Vollender) of Plato is also crucial for Cohen’s later philosophy
- Though being less frequently mentioned, the historical role of Kant is similar, for Cohen, before and after 1871

The foreword to Cohen 1871 has to be interpreted differently

- But consider the following passage from (Cohen 1871, p. IX): „Wie der grösste Teil der Jüngeren, welche der Philosophie obliegen, war auch ich in der Meinung aufgewachsen, dass Kant überwunden, historisch geworden war.“
- Doesn't this indicate that Cohen had rejected Kant before 1871?
- Certainly yes! But, the question is to what stage of his intellectual development before 1871 Cohen is referring here!?
- It seems that most Kant interpreters tacitly assume that Cohen is referring here to the Berlin period where he worked under the influence of Steinthal

- **However, I think that this is entirely implausible:**
- As we already saw, Cohen took Kant to be a key figure of history, already in his Berlin days
- It also has to be noted here that Cohen's dictum certainly cannot refer to Steinthal (as being part of the "grösste Teil der Jüngerer") because even Steinthal did not reject Kant and he did not take him to be an overridden figure of history, rather, he took him, like Cohen, as the only bright spot in modern history of philosophy
- Furthermore, the whole philosophical community in Berlin certainly took Kant to be a key figure already at the middle of the 1860s (e.g., Liebmann's "Kant und die Epigonen" appeared in 1865)
- Thus, it seems extremely plausible that Cohen's move towards Kant took place earlier, already before he came to Berlin, e.g. during his studies in Breslau between 1861 and 1864

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Does folk psychology defend „psychologism“?

- Let us assume that „psychologism“ is a variety of „naturalism“: the view that mental processes have to be explained by means of introspection and/or experimental psychology
- If we take this for granted then folk psychology does not defend „psychologism“ at all
- Folk psychology is neither introspective nor experimental
- Rather, it is based on the notion of „apperceptions“ as **objective representations of mental phenomena**
- In other words, folk psychology is by no means based on a **subjective** understanding of the mental
- Therefore, early Cohen’s philosophy is neither „psychologistic“ nor „naturalistic“

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Did Cohen later abandon his early views?

- As already indicated, Cohen did not abandon his views on Kant in the folk psychology period (but in an earlier period)
- Also, by contrast to Poma's qualification, Cohen did not reject his earlier views on Plato and Kant in his Plato essay from 1878; rather, the idea as vision („Schau“) is crucial for both accounts; moreover, Cohen came back to his early views in his latest writings on Plato from 1915 and 1916
- Finally, a variety of psychology similar to (the objective, non-introspective, non-experimental) folk psychology is crucial for Cohen's system (it represents its final part)

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4. **Cohen never abandoned his early views, he in principle always remained an advocate of folk psychology, in particular, his *system* is centered around a psychological reconstruction in the spirit of Steinthal**

Is there no difference after all between Cohen's early and later views?

- There are differences, of course
- Both Cohen's comprehensive Kant exegesis and his development of a philosophical system are entirely new aspects of his philosophy after 1871
- Cohen did not reject folk psychology, but he also developed a philosophical standpoint that was no longer identical with folk psychology
- Roughly, the first three parts of the *system* are *not* folk psychological, folk psychology is no longer *the only* philosophical method here but has to be accompanied by what Cohen called the *transcendental method*

Fine. But why does this matter?

- **The upshot: there is a thoroughgoing influence of Steinthal and folk psychology on Cohen which is crucial not just for his early views**
- This implies that we have to significantly modify our entire understanding of Cohen (and so-called Marburg school Neo-Kantianism)
- Cohen's philosophy (and the philosophy of the Marburg school) becomes an extension of folk psychology
- Folk psychology, in turn, becomes a variety of psychology being highly relevant for everyone who wants to see culture as a somewhat empirical thing that is inaccessible at the same time to naive conceptions of naturalism or introspective psychology
- **In other words, a profound understanding of Cohen's puzzling notion of the a priori cannot be achieved without folk psychology**

Cohen = Kant + Steinthal