Altery in Hermann Cohen’s
Critical Idealism

Reinier Munk
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

The present paper is a discussion of the concept of alterity as expounded in the first two parts of Hermann Cohen’s System of Philosophy, the Logik and the Ethik, and in his two main works on religion, Der Begriff der Religion, and the Religion der Vernunft. The point I want to make in this paper is that reflection on alterity, as ‘otherness’ and ‘the other’, is a characteristic feature of Cohen’s critical idealism.

The need to come to terms with alterity, in the sense of ‘otherness’ in relation to the problem of identity, is a classic problem in Western philosophy. The problem is addressed already by Plato, and in modern times it can be regarded as the predominant theme of Hegel’s thought. In addition to this, reflection on alterity as ‘the

1 References are made to the following works of Hermann Cohen:
Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums. Leipzig 19191; Frankfurt am Main 19292; henceforth: Religion der Vernunft.
other', in the sense of both the 'alter ego' and the 'Thou', has become the main characteristic of modern philosophy, especially since Husserl. As a post-Hegelian and an elder contemporary of Husserl, Cohen was involved in the discussions on 'otherness' and 'the other'. It was also Cohen who initiated the reflection on alterity in modern Jewish philosophy, as it was adopted and elaborated by Rosenzweig and Levinas.

In order to sustain the claim that reflection on alterity is a characteristic feature of Cohen's thought, I will present my reading of relevant parts of Cohen's *Logik, Ethik, Der Begriff der Religion*, and *Religion der Vernunft*, in that order. I will be arguing, to start with, that the need to come to terms with alterity is the common characteristic of the discussion of the three fundamental problems in the *Logik*, viz., the nature of thought, the relationship between unity and plurality, and the relationship between thought and perception (I). Secondly, I will be arguing that in the *Ethik* alterity is the common characteristic of Cohen's exposition of the plurality of the concepts of the self and the other in the concept of man, as humanity, as well as of the problem of the origin of the self (II). Thirdly and finally, I will be arguing that in the two main works on religion alterity is discussed in terms of the poor, the stranger, the widow, the fatherless, who make an appeal to the I and call him to act in accordance with his responsibility. In this paper I will not deal with part Three of the System, *Asthetik*; the question whether the need to come to terms with alterity is a main characteristic of *Asthetik* still needs further research.

The three main problems which Cohen addresses in his theory of knowledge are in my opinion: the nature of thought, the relationship

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