PREFACE

HERMANN COHEN’S ETHICS

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It is a fine task to honour our predecessors, to recognize in Hermann Cohen’s work a signal promise for the development of Jewish Philosophy in the 20th Century. However, in the essays you hold here we turn to the future and recover Cohen as a source, eine Quelle, for Philosophy in the 21st Century. While there has been a steady interest in Jewish Studies in Cohen’s posthumous Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, for several decades; the English speaking world has largely ignored Cohen. The reasons are tragic, reflecting not only the destruction of the German Jewish community, and also the claim of complete falsification of the ‘German-Jewish symbiosis’, but also the triumph of Heidegger and the claim to refute neo-Kantianism. But the result was silencing one of the great thinkers of the generation before World War I.

The essays assembled here represent the leading Cohen scholars from the United States and Canada, and from Italy, Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Israel. The international nature of this collection points to the rising of a new generation with new interests in Cohen. It would be remiss to fail to notice the long-standing championing of Cohen’s cause by Steven S. Schwarzschild (z’l), and the remarkable contribution of Helmut Holzhey and the Philosophical Seminar in Zürich, where many of the authors studied over the last twenty years. Emerging from their efforts is a new set of explorations both in Cohen’s own system and also in his relation to a wide-range of subsequent thinkers.

And it is to the system most of all that our attention is drawn in this set of essays, and to the center of the system, The Ethics of Pure Will. The various essays at the beginning of this volume will introduce Cohen’s text better than I can in a few words here. Published first in 1904, and then in a second edition in 1907, the second volume of a three volume system, The Ethics is a bold restatement of
neo-Kantian ethics, drawing law and ethics together in defense of a critical liberal vision. It contains the primary text of the I-thou relation, a call for ethical socialism, a rigorous argument for the Rechtstaat (the state bound to the rule of law), as well as a robust humanism and an important prophetic vision of the messianic era. While Cohen insisted that his philosophy was neither dogmatic nor confessional, it is clear that we can view the system as a whole as Jewish philosophy, and The Ethics as a profoundly Jewish response to under-theorized Protestant notions of ethics and particularly of law. In one sense, one could interpret Cohen’s Ethics as a transcendental account of a modern halakhic perspective. Moreover, the concerns and modes of argumentation in The Ethics also appear in Cohen’s more explicitly Jewish writings, as well as in his earlier work on Kant’s philosophy. Thus to see the Jewish quality of The Ethics is not to compromise at all on the philosophic claims therein. It is rather to complement our recent recovery of the late work, and in particular Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, as coordinate with the philosophic system. Even as the late work is every bit as philosophical as the system, so the system is also oriented by Judaism. But this matter will be displayed again and again in the essays here, as the relation of Judaism and philosophical ethics is interrogated repeatedly.

In August of 2001, David Novak and I hosted the First Shoshana Shier Symposium on Judaism and Modernity at the University of Toronto. We held a three day conference devoted to Cohen’s Ethics, a conference that was supported at the University of Toronto by the Jewish Studies Program, the Shoshana Shier Distinguished Visiting Professorship in Jewish Studies, and the Joseph and Gertie Schwartz Memorial Lectureship, and also by the Foundation Dialogik (Mary and Hermann Levin-Goldschmidt). Most of the papers here assembled were presented in some form at that conference; although we have had some welcome additions, too. It was, however, in the context of renewing the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, that these essays received revision and now publication. Although this is a special edition of the journal, it also marks a turn to a more international mission for the journal under a new editorial board and published by Brill. Thus we include more European participation, as well as a contribution in German. But in terms of content, exploring the most creative and rigorous work in Jewish Thought and Philosophy, this issue belongs in the excellent series of issue published in the preceding volumes of the Journal.
The essays follow a somewhat simple order. We begin with essays that address Cohen’s Ethics, particularly as found in the work, *The Ethics of the Pure Will*, and then proceed to explore the relation of Cohen with other thinkers. We begin with Michael Zank’s introduction which situates *The Ethics of the Pure Will* within the philosophical system. Zank not only recounts some of the history of reception in tension with Franz Rosenzweig’s claim, but also devotes careful consideration to the role of system in Cohen’s thought. He concludes, moreover, with the question of the relation of *The Ethics* to Judaism.

Helmut Holzhey offers us a rich account of the contents of the *The Ethics*, giving us a helpful overview of the work. His account focuses on the problematic of the human and of humanity. And he explores the contrast between *sein* and *sollen* (being and the ought-to-be) as the engine of the ethics. His exploration of the problem of God in the ethics leads to Cohen’s distinctive requirement of the sovereignty of ethics over religion. The conclusion of Cohen’s work, and of this overview, is a discussion of the virtues.

A complex and radical interrogation of both Cohen’s work and of its context is staged in the essay by Gesine Palmer. Borrowing from a musical motif of Charles Ives, Palmer brings a set of objections and questions to Cohen, and then in inverse order takes each objector away. Guided by Rosenzweig’s claim about his own work that Judaism was not the content but the method of his thinking, she asks, Can this be so for Cohen? In the process, we encounter both biographical and contextual relations of Cohen’s thought, as well as a sharp insight into the role of jurisprudence in ethics.

Andrea Poma examines the problem of realizing the Ideal. Cohen’s philosophy is a critical idealism, and for ethics that raises the risk that ethics will be only about fantastic wishes, and never become concrete or effective. Poma links the problem in cognition (how do we know existent particulars) to the realization of ethics, and shows the resources that Cohen wields to gain existential reality for ethics. Hartwig Wiedebach examines the role of the body in this realization. He explores the relation of Cohen’s thought to physiology, and focuses on the question of the production of a rational affect, first in the discussion of the pure will, and then in relation to the virtues.

The final essay focusing on Cohen’s *Ethics* is by Reinier Munk, asking the question of how God can be properly belong to the system of philosophy, and especially in the *Ethics*. What emerges is both the
radical subordination of religion to ethics, as well as the vigorous rejection of Kant’s own arguments in the *2nd Critique* and his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. The solution Munk offers focuses on the way that in the system religion serves as a source (and not the origin) of ideas vital for ethics. Like the extensive role of history of science and philosophy in the system, the history of religion, and especially Judaism, serves a key role in the appearance of the contents of ethics, but not in their logic or justification.

With Almut Bruckstein’s essay we shift from Cohen to relations with other thinkers. On the one hand her essay addresses Maimonides, and Cohen’s *Ethics of Maimonides*, and on the other hand she has recourse to Derrida and his address about Cohen in Jerusalem. Bruckstein examines the Protestant and Germanist aspect of Cohen’s thought in order to interrogate the situation of ‘normalized’ Jewish Thought in Jerusalem. Despite the political destruction of German-Judaism in the Shoah, Bruckstein re-appropriates the hyphenated Judaism in Cohen as a much needed disruption of Jewish identity and philosophy. In this respect, Derrida’s questioning of Cohen and of Maimonides, and of his own unstable identity, offer an important disruption that Cohen’s thought can perform in the name of ethics.

Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky examines Cohen in relation to Walter Benjamin (and in that context, Gershom Scholem). While she is able to show how deeply embroiled Benjamin’s project is in his early and ongoing engagement with Cohen, Deuber-Mankowsky situates the relation over the crisis of World War I. The historical moment is more than a backdrop, but is rather a focus of rupture and a moment in which the ethical task of studying history gains far greater moment. Benjamin appears then as a specific intensive response to Cohen’s *Ethics*.

We move to a third continent with Avi Bernstein-Nahar, who tries to re-situate Cohen in our current moment for the American Jewish community. Bernstein-Nahar regards this import project as risky and seriously flawed, but by comparing Cohen with the Canadian political philosophy, Charles Taylor, he discerns a valuable role that Cohen’s thought might have in education. This is not a simple rehearsal of Cohen’s own education projects, but rather an account of how Cohen’s interpretation of historical consciousness might help us give a better framework for a contemporary Jewish community.

With Leora Batnitzky we grapple with the dialectical relation of Leo Strauss and Cohen. She argues that Strauss, despite his protests,
was deeply formed by Cohen’s project, and that he also set his own task as overcoming Cohen by destroying that very project. The essay highlights a question of hermeneutics from Strauss’s perspective, binding the idealizing interpretation by Cohen to an optimism about modern rationality and ethics. She emphasizes Strauss’s battle with historicism in examining a circle of Strauss, Cohen, and Maimonides. If Benjamin’s historian’s crisis was World War I, then Strauss’s is World War II and the Shoa, with a radical critique of Cohen’s confidence in reason.

The final essay by Lawrence Kaplan examines Cohen in relation to R. Joseph Soloveitchik. The question of concern is why Cohen ignored the second and higher form of repentance attributed to Resh Lakish in the Talmud—repentance from love that transforms past sins into merits, particularly because Cohen cites the first form attributed to Resh Lakish, that repentance can transform intentional sins into unintentional ones. Soloveitchik emphasizes the pair, and Kaplan examines both the hesitation of Cohen and the development of Soloveitchik’s theory. This rich presentation of Soloveitchik’s theory sheds important light on the way that ethics in Cohen is unable to bridge the gap between the moral ideal and our striving—and how that gap itself is a decisive motor for Cohen’s ethics.

These later essays are not simply examinations of influence—although they do explore that, too—rather, through contrast with other thinkers, they open Cohen’s ethics in two ways. First, they show us the deep questions that are operating within Cohen’s texts, and second they raise questions for ethics itself, particularly in relation to Jewish tradition. That specific topic, the primacy of ethics for Judaism, received one of its greatest and most philosophically rigorous treatments in Cohen’s work. For indeed, with Cohen thinking of the relation of ethics and Judaism became a truly philosophical task.