Rosenzweig’s Readings of Hermann Cohen’s 
Logic of Pure Cognition

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In November 1913, Franz Rosenzweig, “responding to a sudden urge solely of curiosity, not of interest”, attended a lecture by Hermann Cohen at the Berlin Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (probably on the topic “The Fundamental Concepts of the Jewish Religion from an Ethical Point of View”).¹ He found Cohen’s personality quite extraordinary, but not his philosophy; in the autumn of 1916, he still dismissed it as “exceedingly unimportant”.² What separated him at this time from the philosopher’s thinking was, as he later wrote to Margrit Rosenstock, mainly Cohen’s “rationalism”.³

All that changed shortly before Cohen’s death when in February 1918 Rosenzweig received a carbon copy of Cohen’s still unpublished Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism.⁴ In April he ordered a copy of the second edition of Logic of Pure Cognition.⁵ By August 15, Rosenzweig was deeply absorbed in reading Cohen: “Cohen is incredibly tough going. I’d never have thought I would have had such difficulties again with a book of philosophy”. But Rosenzweig has a few ambivalent feelings slogging his way through Cohen. Because “I’m still not sure it’s really worth it to

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⁴Cf. letter to Rudolf Ehrenberg, March 5, 1918, Briefe und Tagebücher, I 514.

understand him. I’m almost inclined to think it isn’t. But now I’ve started this, and I’ll read him through to the end.”6 One day later: “I’m boggled down in Cohen’s logic, don’t understand much of it, partially because of my inadequate knowledge of math, in part due to his brevity, which is concentrated like the style of a protocol, or seems epigrammatic. But since I repeatedly forget he’s dead and ask him questions, interrupt him, tell him impossible things he’d ‘never put up with from anyone else’ and he answers me back, it’s actually very nice. I’m using the printed pages as a kind of magic book, a volume of incantations”.7

Directly from this study – Rosenzweig, “as a result of Cohen’s Logic, now think[...s] of Cohen non-stop”8 – he suddenly commences August 23 or 24 with work on his Star of Redemption.9 “Naturally, I can’t read Cohen any more. It’s quite funny the way my brain is going off in directions quite different from his, and how it’s working on its own account”.10 Nonetheless, Rosenzweig repeatedly goes back to Cohen’s books. On January 2, 1919 he writes to Gritli: “afterward I’ll read on again in Cohen’s system and improve my own in the process, seeing especially what I’ve forgotten. That’s going to produce some really lively criticism”.11 It’s quite evident that Cohen’s Logic of Pure Cognition – in an intensive interaction with Religion of Reason – was for Rosenzweig a kind of first spark, a generator for jump-starting work on the Star of Redemption.12

Logic of Origins

At the very heart of Rosenzweig’s reading of Cohen’s Logic is his theory of the “origin”, derived from the principles of differential and integral calculus. Reiner Wiehl, Norbert Samuelson, Peter E. Gordon, and others have described Rosenzweig’s mathematics on different occasions.13 Robert Gibbs has convincingly shown that the answer to Cohen’s Logic in the Star of Redemption is primarily geared to eliminating various weak points in Schelling’s Ages of the World.14

Schelling wants to answer the old question, why there is something rather than nothing.15 So he meditates in narrative on a primal history of Being. Schelling argues: dominant in the “unprethinkable Being” of God himself lies an erotically animated

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6To his mother, Briefe und Tagebücher, I 592.
7To Margrit Rosenstock, August 16, 1918, “Gritli”-Briefe, 119.
8To his mother, August 22, 1918, Briefe und Tagebücher, I 598.
9See letter to Margrit Rosenstock, August 24, 1919, thus only two days after the last cited letter, “Gritli”-Briefe, 128; also letter to Gertrud Oppenheim, August 27, 1918, Briefe und Tagebücher, I 599.
10To Margrit Rosenstock, “Gritli”-Briefe, ibid..
11To Margrit Rosenstock, Jan. 2, 1919, “Gritli”-Briefe, 211.
12Quotes are taken from the 4th ed.: Der Stern der Erlösung. The Hague, Nijhoff 1976 (Gesammelte Schriften 2). All emphasizes are ours.