In this contribution I would like to challenge the gist of a commentary that is my own and that appeared not long ago, namely the first English translation and commentary on Hermann Cohen’s much-cited essay on Maimonides’ Ethics of 1908.¹ As it is the case with any commentary, overwriting my own commentary means to question or even efface the commentary beneath, i.e. the commentary flanking Cohen’s important essay on Maimonides in the recently published edition. Commentaries assume to be more primary than the texts that surrender to its margins—as we know that the meaning of any text originates with commentary and translation.² It is the English translation and commentary of Cohen’s great essay on “Maimonides’ Ethics” of 1908 that comes under scrutiny here.

Recollection

Cohen’s essay on “Maimonides’ Ethics,” Die Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis of 1908,³ is no doubt to be counted among the most influential and important texts in Jewish philosophy of the 20th century. Its title announces a treatment of Maimonides’ Ethics, but what we find is an exemplary discussion of the Platonic Good Beyond Being


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as guarantor of the Kantian and prophetic ideals of messianism and universal humanity. Cohen’s discussion of Maimonides is based on a detailed analysis of the medieval theory of negative and actional attributes, whose intricacies I have engaged in on different occasions. Here it suffices to say that Maimonides’ distinction between negative and privative attributes—placing an Aristotelian distinction at the centre of a Platonic argument—serves to illustrate the ethical bent of Cohen’s own philosophy. At the very heart of Maimonides’ theory of attributes, Cohen discloses a logical argument, a movement called “anticipation”: emulating God’s goodness means to anticipate the human good, a messianic move, claimed as the methodological key to Cohen’s reading of the Jewish sources. Cohen proposes a logical method of origin that is called ethical in that it predicates reality upon ideality, past upon future, world upon God. In his essay on Maimonides, Cohen mirrors his critical idealism in the medieval structures of negative theology, advancing an activity of negation, in which Being originates in and is ruptured by nothingness, in which presence originates in absence, in which totality is ruptured by infinity, ontology by ethics, Self by Other, past by future, text by commentary. Love and justice, according to Cohen the two virtues that constitute humanity, are reflected in the Jewish canonical formulation of the attributes of action, “rachum ve chanun,” “gracious and long-suffering, full of compassion,” etc., the “thirteen attributes” serve as “ur-bilder”—origins for human action.

Cohen’s essay on “Maimonides Ethics” more explicitly than any other text demonstrates the hermeneutical correlation between Cohen’s Platonic philosophy and what he calls Judaism. The essay on

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8 Ex. 34, 6–7.