Hermann Cohen — Kant among the Prophets

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The selective reception by general philosophy and social scientific methodology in the European tradition of the mode of neo-Kantianism founded by Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) has contributed to the widespread undermining of conceptual thinking in favour of the hermeneutics of reading. To assess Cohen's thought as a reading and re-originating of the Jewish tradition involves a predicament of circularity: for the question of reading and origin is not neutral but derives from the partial reception of the object addressed. The task of reassessment changes from a methodologically independent survey to a challenge posed by current thought, unsure of its modernity or post-modernity, to re-establish contact with a formative but long-forgotten part of itself.

No longer solely academic, this exercise will have to confront two especially difficult aspects of Cohen's thought. First, he did not "read" Kant, he destroyed the Kantian philosophy. In its place, he founded a "neo-Kantianism" on the basis of a logic of origin, difference and repetition. As a logic of validity, this neo-Kantian mathesis is often at stake when its practitioners prefer to acknowledge

1 This paper was originally prepared for the Symposium, "The Playground of Textuality: Modern Jewish Intellectuals and the Horizon of Interpretation," First Annual Wayne State University Press Jewish Symposium, held in Detroit, 20-22 March, 1988. Each of the eight participants elected to reassess an individual thinker by focussing on that thinker as a reader of the tradition — ancient and modern. In addition, we were asked to consider the following issues: 1. What is the contribution of Jewish intellectuals/writers to what is characteristically modern and post-modern in how we read texts? 2. How have Jewish intellectuals/writers in the twentieth century created new ways of thinking and employed new ways of reading? 3. How has this new way of reading re-originated what it means to be a Jew in the modern and post-modern world? 4. Have these Jewish thinkers and writers — some at the centre and others at the margin of Judaism — created a new modern Jewish hermeneutic theory and tradition?
themselves as the progeny of Nietzsche, Heidegger or Benjamin. Second, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper, Cohen's logic is inseparable from his ethics and his philosophy of Judaism. This implies that, since Cohen, the connection between the philosophy of Judaism and general philosophy has been fundamental, in a sense that has not hitherto been imagined or explored.

Moses Mendelssohn — so Altmann, his biographer, relates — eventually managed to write a letter to Kant, and tell him that he could not fathom the Critique of Pure Reason. In Morgenstunden (1785), however, Mendelssohn refers to "the all crushing Kant [der alles zermalmende Kant]," and implores him to rebuild, "with the same spirit with which he had torn down." Hermann Cohen renews Mendelssohn's Judaic Enlightenment by embracing Kant's destructive method, but, paradoxically, he employs it against the critical philosophy itself. Although Cohen's invention of a philosophy of Being as "productive origin," developed in his three part System, remains largely unknown and is not available in English translation, its panlogism has released, and continues to release generations of thinkers who remain beholden to Kant from the critical philosophy as such, as well as from engagement with any of the forms of critique which succeeded it. If, as I hope to show, Cohen's

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