

STUDIES IN GERMAN IDEALISM

**YEARNING FOR FORM
AND OTHER ESSAYS ON
HERMANN COHEN'S
THOUGHT**

by *Andrea Poma*

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Studies in German Idealism

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ANDREA POMA

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following is a list of abbreviations of Hermann Cohen's Works with explanations and some essential bibliographical references.

- W* *Werke*, hg. vom Hermann-Cohen-Archiv am Philosophischen Seminar der Universität Zürich unter der Leitung von Helmut Holzhey (later: im Auftrag des Hermann-Cohen-Archivs am Philosophischen Seminar der Universität Zürich und des Moses-Mendelssohn-Zentrums für europäisch-jüdische Studien Universität Potsdam, hg. von Helmut Holzhey, Julius H. Schoeps, Christian Schulte), Georg Olms, Hildesheim/Zürich/New York, 1977 ff.
- S* *Schriften zur Philosophie und Zeitgeschichte*, 2 Bde, hg. von Albert Görland und Ernst Cassirer, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin 1928.
- J* *Jüdische Schriften*, 3 Bde, hg. von Bruno Strauß, mit einer Einleitung von Franz Rosenzweig, Schwetschke, Berlin 1924.
- KTE* *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, Dümmler, Berlin 1871, 1885²; Bruno Cassirer, Berlin 1918³; repr. in *W I/I-III*. Quotations normally come from the third edition. When it is necessary to specify the edition, the abbreviation will be accompanied by a superscript.
- KBE* *Kants Begründung der Ethik*, Dümmler, Berlin 1877; Bruno Cassirer, Berlin 1910², from which quotations are taken.
- KBA* *Kants Begründung der Ästhetik*, Dümmler, Berlin 1889.

- PIM* *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte. Ein Kapitel zur Grundlegung der Erkenntniskritik*, Dümmler, Berlin 1883; repr. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1968; repr. in *S* 2 1-170 and in *W* 5/I, from which quotations are taken.
- E* *Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag zu F. A. Langes Geschichte des Materialismus*, Baedeker, Leipzig 1896, 1902²; Brandstetter, Leipzig 1914³. The last of the three editions, published with the ninth edition of the Lange's work, was reprinted in *S* 2 171-302 and in *W* 5/II (with variations from other editions), from which quotations are taken.
- LRE* *System der Philosophie. Erster Teil: Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, Bruno Cassirer, Berlin 1902, 1914²; the latter edition was reprinted in *W* 6 (with variations from the first edition), from which quotations are taken.
- ERW* *System der Philosophie. Zweiter Teil: Ethik des reinen Willens*, Bruno Cassirer, Berlin 1904, 1907²; the latter edition was reprinted in *W* 7 (with variations from the first edition), from which quotations are taken.
- ÄRG* *System der Philosophie. Dritter Teil: Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*, 2 Bde, Bruno Cassirer, Berlin 1912; repr. in *W* 8/9, from which quotations are taken.
- BR* *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*, Töpelmann, Gießen 1915; repr. in *W* 10, from which quotations are taken.
- RV* *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, hg. von Benzion Kellermann, Fock, Leipzig 1919; *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, hg. von Bruno Strauß, J. Kaufmann, Frankfurt a. M. 1929; repr. J. Melzer, Köln 1959, from which quotations are taken; English translation, with an introduction by Simon Kaplan, introductory essay by Leo Strauss, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., New York 1972.

INTRODUCTION

HERMANN COHEN: A PHILOSOPHY CLASSIC?

Hermann Cohen's philosophy has now, finally, received the Recognition it deserves. His *Ethik des reinen Willens* has recently been included among the classic works of philosophy.¹ This recognition is certainly an act of justice and truth, not only towards Cohen, but also to the history of philosophy, and it is all the more to be appreciated since it was not necessarily obvious, not so much for the value of Cohen's thought in itself, as for the somewhat problematic history of his reception. As soon as he left Marburg in 1912, where he had taught for thirty six years at the city's university, which he had made famous to the extent of turning it, in the words of Thomas Nipperdey, into the «Mecca of continental philosophy»,² all traces and recollection of the philosophy of Cohen and his school soon disappeared, as a result of historical events and the arrival on the scene of new perspectives and new stars in the philosophical firmament, in the first place Martin Heidegger, who, in 1923, began teaching at Marburg.

During the years following Cohen's death, his thought and work were seriously neglected and only in the late 1960s, with the thesis by Dieter Adelman,³ did new interest for them slowly develop. In the following years, with the setting up of the *Cohen-Archiv* at the University of Zurich and the beginning of the new edition of Cohen's

¹ Cf. *Klassische Werke der Philosophie. Von Aristoteles bis Habermas*, hg. von R. Brandt und Th. Sturm, Reclam, Leipzig 2002; the chapter on Cohen, *Hermann Cohen: Ethik des reinen Willens*, was written by Helmut Holzhey.

² Cf. TH. NIPPERDEY, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866-1918*, Bd. 1, C. H. Beck, München 1990, p. 681.

³ D. ADELMANN, *Einheit des Bewußtseins als Grundproblem der Philosophie Hermann Cohens*, Diss., Heidelberg 1968.

Werke,⁴ both the result of the work of Helmut Holzhey, also the author of the fundamental study *Cohen und Natorp*,⁵ research on Cohen took a decisive turn. A small, but seriously engaged group of researchers, in constant, fruitful contact with the *Cohen-Archiv*, arrived at many stimulating results in re-publication, translation, analysis and Interpretation of his works. Cohen's output was again brought to the attention of readers of philosophy. More recently Cohen has attracted attention and research as a front rank protagonist of Jewish thought.⁶

It is thus understandable that this limited group of researchers, who have been working so hard together, over the years, on the rediscovery and representation of Cohen's philosophy, should see the present, rightful recognition of its value, with a sense of satisfaction. Cohen's thought undoubtedly has all the characteristics of a classic. It faced the great problems of philosophical tradition, with full critical awareness and, at the same time, with the capacity to open up new, original routes. It represents one of the last expressions of great systematic thought. Cohen's system is not so only in name, which was actually more due to publishers' needs than a deep rooted intention of Cohen himself. The systematic character does not even come out in the architectural structure, which, as a matter of fact, has several weak, problematic points. It is thus not a question of a philosophical system as a solid, complete doctrinal construction, in the traditional scholastic sense, nor as an all embracing, totalitarian procedure of thought, in which a sense of security and infallible method reduces all otherness to itself, in Hegel's sense. We are dealing with systematic thought, rather than a completed construction, with philosophical procedure, whose method is a system because it is critical, i.e. because it moves

⁴ The publication of *Kleinere Schriften* in this edition has been edited up to the present by Hartwig Wiedeback.

⁵ H. HOLZHEY, *Cohen und Natorp*, 2 Bde, Schwabe & Co. AG Verlag, Basel/Stuttgart 1986.

⁶ I have attempted to provide a somewhat more detailed survey of contemporary research on Cohen in my essay entitled *Hermann Cohen: Judaism and Critical Idealism*, which has not been included in this book, since it is awaiting publication in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, ed. by M. L. Morgan and P.E. Gordon. See also U. SIEG, *Aufstieg und Niedergang des Marburger Neukantianismus. Die Geschichte einer philosophischen Schulgemeinschaft*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 1994, pp. 11-24.

incessantly in the direction of a system, in the awareness of never being able to possess it, incessantly putting it up for discussion. This thought is profoundly systematic because it rejects all grounds, all stable structures and fulfilment in the name of the most radically systematic requirements of foundation, method and task.

Nevertheless, Cohen was also able to consider the philosophical system from an external perspective, and reflect on the system with its unity as his starting point. His works on the philosophy of religion are not only philosophical interpretation of the contents of religion, of Jewish monotheism, but also consideration, by means of the «method» of monotheism, as it were, of the contents of philosophical thought, starting off from the systematic unity that critical philosophy must always have before it as a regulative idea, but can never take up as a constitutive concept, since it must rigorously remain in the sphere of the methodological distinction between logic and ethics imposed by the scientific method.

At the same time, Cohen's works on the philosophy of religion are such a wide ranging, detailed reflection on all the most important themes of religious tradition in the light of Jewish monotheism, that he can be rightly included among the greatest interpreters, not only of Judaism, but also of monotheist religion in general.

Like all great classics, he was also able to reconcile the abstract nature of the system with concrete intellectual engagement in the historical, political, social and religious context of his own time. His considerable, uninterrupted activity as an essayist is evidence of this close tie between his systematic research and active participation in his historical situation.

There is, however, another characteristic, shared by great classics, which needs foregrounding in Cohen's thought, i.e. the fruitful nature of his weak points. On the whole, his philosophy is anything but complete and entirely satisfactory. A number of examples of incoherence, inconsistency, problems and difficulties can be, and have been pointed out. Despite this, however, I believe it is fair to say that, owing to a paradox common to great classics (such as Plato, Leibniz and Kant), these problematic aspects not only do not undermine the overall value of Cohen's philosophy, but that they are actually often its most lasting, fruitful aspects, since they «provoke thought», re-launch philosophical thought beyond the very results achieved by Cohen. The

most «classic» trait of a philosopher, and Cohen saw this in both Plato and Kant, does not lie in the solutions he proposed, but in the ability to pose questions, set up problems, open up horizons, where philosophical research will always be able to find the room to move on.

Since I have also been working, in close, cordial contact with other scholars, on the analysis and interpretation of Cohen's philosophy, for the last twenty years (my first essay on the subject having come out in 1983), I hope that I can be included among those who, nowadays, are satisfied with this new general interest. However small my contribution may be, I think that some useful purpose can be served in collecting selected papers in one volume in English (with the exception of my book on *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*,⁷ and a few other essays). The papers collected together in the present volume deal with different aspects of Cohen's thought, especially ethical, political, aesthetic and religious ones. But I have almost always attempted to follow the ubiquitous presence of certain important themes in Cohen, their capacity for containing meanings that cannot be limited to a single philosophical sphere: themes that are keys to reading unity of inspiration in his thought, which is more deeply imbedded than the exterior architectural unity of his work.

In my view, the search for the fundamental themes behind Cohen is an important task, if, nowadays, we wish to see this philosopher as a present day vital point of reference, and not only as a monument of the past. Recognising Cohen as a philosophy classic, as I have already mentioned, is an element of historical justice and scientific truthfulness and reason for public satisfaction. Now I should like to add that it could be a misleading, counterproductive result. If seeing Cohen as a philosophy classic means distancing him from present day debate, only to canonise him on a far off altar, turning him into a mere object of respectful homage, then his heritage will have been totally lost. There is a monumental, museum like way of seeing classics, only leading to historical research, and, at worst, a devout scholastic attitude towards them. This way of turning a classic into a corpse to be honoured is an obvious betrayal, especially in the case of someone,

⁷ A. POMA, *La filosofia critica di Hermann Cohen*, Mursia, Milano 1988; Eng. trans. by J. Denton, State University of New York Press, Albany (New York) 1997.

like Cohen, whose greatest achievement lies in the critical, challenging character of his thought. So as to avoid this risk, in the last essay in the book, I have attempted an initial reflection on the present relevance of Cohen's philosophy. I am certainly not pretending that Cohen can be seen as a postmodern philosopher, but that important themes for the inspiration of philosophical reflection in contemporary culture are to be found in him. If this inspiration were to be taken up, interesting routes could be opened up for understanding and elaborating our present condition. This is why this last essay provides the title for the whole volume, since, by recognising the classic nature of Cohen's thought, precisely in the name of his critical teaching, we shall not pause even for a second over sterile celebration, but refer to him so as to continue to research and think.

I should like to thank Prof. Reinier Munk for accepting this book in the series *Studies in German Idealism* he edits and Springer for publishing it. I would also like to thank Dr. Luca Bertolino for his role in preparing this book for publication.

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Andrea Poma