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Herman Cohen, Maimonides, and the Jewish Virtue of Humility

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Abstract

This paper explores Hermann Cohen's engagement with, and appropriation of, Maimonides to refute the common assumption that Cohen's endeavor was to harmonize Judaism with Western culture. Exploring the changes of Cohen's conception of humility from *Ethik des reinen Willens* to the *Ethics of Maimonides* and *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, this paper highlights the centrality of the collective Jewish mission to bear witness against the dominant order of Western civilization and philosophy in Cohen's Jewish thought.

Keywords

Hermann Cohen, Maimonides, humility

The nature of Hermann Cohen's engagement with the philosophy of Maimonides is difficult to fully discern. Arthur Hyman, in his article "Maimonidean Elements in Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion," asks the question: "To what extent is Cohen a genuine interpreter of Maimonides' thought and to what extent does Maimonides provide a kind of 'prooftext' for Cohen's own philosophy?"¹ Hyman acknowledges, "The answer to this question is not easily discovered."¹ The difficulty that Hyman encounters in this line of inquiry is that Cohen is not a straightforward exegete and yet is nevertheless a profound interpreter of the authors and works he comments upon. This peculiarity is a result of Cohen's innovative hermeneutics, which involves unfurling ideas beyond the limits their author may have set for them. As a result, it is perhaps more helpful to explore the nature of the role Maimonides plays in Cohen's thought rather than assessing whether or not Cohen was a "good" Maimonidean.

Cohen's engagement with Maimonides' work is profound and is suddenly bound up with significant changes in his late thought. In this essay, my task is to trace the ways in which Cohen's prolonged engagement with Maimonides effects, or at least reflects, transformations in his thought. I will follow one particular arc, the development of the virtues of truthfulness (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) and modesty (*Bescheidenheit*) from *Ethik des reinen Willens*² to *Ethics of Maimonides*³ and *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*,⁴ paying particular attention to the development of the role of the virtue of humility (*Demut*) in Cohen's later texts.⁵

God, the Foundational Hypothesis

In order to understand the particular nature of the dialogue that Cohen facilitates with Maimonides' thought, it is imperative to begin with the concept of God operative in *Ethik des reinen Willens*. Indeed, Cohen's sole mention of Maimonides in the *Ethik* is in the chapter titled "The Idea of God." In this chapter he lauds the "Arab-Islamic and the Arab-Jewish theologians [Dogmatik] and philosophers of

religion” who “pursued in true [wahrhafter] religiosity the fundamental idea that God was an Idea.” Not coincidentally, among these thinkers, Cohen distinguishes Maimonides as the superlative “teacher and leader of rationalism [Lehrer und Führer des Rationalismus].”⁶ However, to understand why Cohen lauds Maimonides, and in what manner Maimonides is meant to receive this praise, we must understand Cohen’s own philosophical discussion of God and its relation to his systematic exposition of ethics.

Cohen’s methodology, his critical idealism, is rooted in a careful opposition to what he defines as “Metaphysics.” “*Idealism* stands in a methodological opposition to everything otherwise called *metaphysics*. This opposition is irreconcilable.”⁷ Metaphysics, which haunts both naturalism and Romantic Idealism (whose most famous representatives are Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling), fails to recognize the distinction between ethics and logic, the latter being the form of knowing (*Erkenntnis*) operative in the realm of the natural sciences. In short, Cohen argues that by ignoring this distinction both the naturalist—by only recognizing the empirical self—and the Romantic Idealist—by deducing ethics from the given state of affairs—fail to recognize the ideal. Both groups of thinkers, then, apply the logic of the sciences, that of “identity,” willy-nilly to ethics. And while the concept of “*identity is appropriate [richtig] for logic . . . it is a pitfall for ethics*.”⁸ As a result, both the naturalist and the Romantic Idealist fail to respect the methodological distinction between the two realms of knowledge, and as a result, they nullify ethics, properly speaking, altogether.

Cohen employs the concept of God to distinguish the sort of knowing appropriate to ethics, the logic of the ideal, while nevertheless preserving the legitimacy of the logic of identity for natural science. Indeed, God’s function is not merely to secure the distinction of these two realms of knowledge but also to secure their harmony with one another. “Being is not only the being of thinking, but also the being of willing [Das Sein ist nicht nur das Sein des Denkens, sondern auch das des Wollens]. And this willing is the pure will [reine Wollen], the will of morality [Wollen der Sittlichkeit]. Thus for being there persists a double correlation, to thinking and to willing [doppelte Korrelation, zum Denken und zum Wollen.]”⁹ God is a function of reason—indeed, reason’s ultimate and deepest function, Truth (*Wahrheit*).¹⁰ God as *Wahrheit*, as the two-fold nature of being, breaks with metaphysics’s prioritization of identity. Ethics, while tied to the mode of being operative in the natural sciences (logic), nevertheless maintains its own correlation with being and is thus oriented by its own distinct form of knowing.

Cohen describes this correlation secured by God as a “combination [Verbindung],”¹¹ or better an “accord [Einklang],”¹² between logic and ethics, two separate, quasi-autonomous members of his system of philosophy. As a result, Truth reflects the ideality of actuality, that logic and ethics, i.e., the worlds of nature and morality, can ultimately be reconciled (though not sublated). Truth is more than simply logic, that is, the mode of truth operative in the natural sciences; rather, the deepest account of Truth is the accord of logic and ethics.¹³ The idea of God is the accord, the *Einklang*, of ethics and science. What this means for Cohen, at least in the *Ethik*, is that the natural world is not so constituted as to make the ethical task impossible: in other words, nature will not perish, thus ensuring that the infinite task of ethics can continue unhindered. It is precisely in this sense that the concept of God serves as the ultimate hypothesis and foundation of Cohen’s thought, a hypothesis that both preserves the distinction between ethics and logic while nevertheless securing their harmonious accord. It is in performing this function that “*the concept of God becomes the concept of Truth [Begriff der Wahrheit]*.”¹⁴

As a foundational hypothesis, the idea of God serves not merely as the transcendental conditions for the possibility of the moral endeavor, but as such also serves as the cornerstone of a hermeneutical lens that approaches actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) through the lens of the ideal.¹⁵ In other words, the concept of God secures, on a transcendental level, the ideality of actuality, such that ethics is not to be restricted to the

realm of actuality but is rather governed by its attention to the ideal. Thus Cohen can make the claim, that “the natural will [natürliche Wille] is not the pure [reine] will. The natural human being [Mensch] is not the pure human being. The empirical I is not the pure I.”¹⁶ Instead, the Self is an ideal construct. The Self is always underway, always in a formative process.

God’s radical transcendence is essential to this double correlation between logic and ethics, which secures both the legitimacy of ethical knowing, and God’s status as Truth. Indeed, it is Maimonides’ relentless war on anthropomorphism and myth that Cohen appreciates in this context, as that which first secures the character of radical transcendence for the idea of God.¹⁷ Cohen appropriates Maimonides’ war on myth and God’s attributes in order to construe the idea of God in such a way that it has a purely functional meaning, and entails no metaphysical implications. Cohen claims that “All attributes are evil, which do not solely bring to expression the harmonious coherence [harmonischen Zusammenhang] between logic and ethics.”¹⁸ In other words, it would be a serious methodological error to conceive of God as a personal being, or indeed as possessing any metaphysical attributes whatsoever, as this would jeopardize the *Einklang* of logic and ethics. Thus Cohen finds in Maimonides’ decision to “*detach the concept of life from the concept of God*” an act of unparalleled philosophical rigor,¹⁹ in that it secures the necessary conditions for the transcendence of God, which is essential for God’s status as Truth.

Truthfulness and Modesty

Unsatisfied with Kant’s conceptions of selfhood and of autonomy,²⁰ Cohen stresses that the Self is always in process, and is always being grounded by means of its relationship to legality. Cohen rejects Kant’s claim that there is a given self that legislates to itself as a residue of metaphysical psychology, and argues instead that the Self is created through the process of legislation. “From law-giving [Gesetzgebung] it [i.e., the Self] arrives: in it [i.e., the Self] first attests to itself [bezeugt sich das Selbst], in it [i.e., the law-giving] the Self engenders itself [in ihr erzeugt es sich.]”²¹ And for the Self to be properly founded, access to *Allheit* is required.²² Indeed, *Allheit* is not only constitutive of the ideal for which the Self strives, but it also provides the (non)foundation upon which the ethical Self is grounded. Or, as Cohen puts it, “*Allheit* constitutes not only the successful end but rather also the proper beginning [Die Allheit bildet nicht nur das glückliche Ende, sondern sie ist auch der rechte Anfang].”²³ This statement has two very important implications. First, the Self qua ideal is rooted in proper foundations, i.e., *Allheit*. And since *Allheit* is an ideal, the individual’s relation to it is always solely that of a task; it is a task performed repeatedly through ethical action. Second, it is essential that one’s methodological foundations are secure: the *Allheit* must be genuine, lest one be led astray by false ideals which lead to distorted notions of the Self.

The last seven chapters of *Ethik des reinen Willens* offer a theory of virtues to stabilize the notion of the Self, which, because it is aimed at an unattainable ideal, must of necessity always be in flux. The virtues are a way of incorporating the affects into one’s behavior in order to stabilize one’s Self without violating the purity of the Self’s action (*Handlung*), i.e., the Self’s task of perpetually creating itself. Cohen divides his virtues into two orders, Honor (*Ehre*) and Love (*Liebe*). While love is secondary, in that it is tied to relative communities, honor is the virtue grounded in *Allheit*. According to Cohen, “*true honor lays the monitoring authority [Kontrollinstanz] in the Allheit*,” and therefore it alone is the order of virtue that properly grounds law and the ethical state (*Staat*),²⁴ and thus also it alone lays the proper foundations for the generation of the ethical Self. Now, to be sure, as finite human beings, we necessarily exist as both juridical persons (i.e., members of the ethical state properly rooted in *Allheit*) and as members of particular communities (which are part of *Mehrheit*, an order subordinate to *Allheit*), which ensures the necessity of both orders of virtues (virtues of honor and virtues of love). However, Cohen gives priority to

the virtues of honor, although these virtues are correlated with those of love, as we will see in the case of truthfulness and modesty.

For Cohen, genuine ethics, an ethics independent of logic, demands that the self is not simply its own givenness, or reflection upon this givenness, i.e., “representation [Vorstellung],”²⁵ but it must rather also consist in a “striving.”²⁶ Since the concept of Truth for Cohen secures the genuine existence of the Ought, the reality of the ideal, such that ethics is a sphere of human action correlated with but not deduced from logic, the conception of selfhood should be freed from the realm of the given. As a virtue, truthfulness is absolutely foundational for Cohen, in that in the final analysis, the Self, writ large, correlated with *Allheit*, can only be reached through self-knowledge (*Selbst-erkenntnis*).²⁷ As a virtue, “truthfulness means the constancy of moral work, thus truthfulness designates the route of knowledge, in the constant serious work of the self to implement itself in so far as it can make itself actual.”²⁸ Truthfulness, then, is the ultimate expression of the ideality of the self as oriented towards the universal, not only as a perpetual process in construction, but also in its practical connections to the state, the need for the philosophical accountability of ethics, the need for honesty in contracts and oaths, and so on. It is the bedrock of everything else.

However, modesty as a virtue is necessary as a correlate with truthfulness because it checks and softens the harshness that accompanies the latter. Truthfulness is unwavering, demanding the ideal and accepting nothing less. But modesty accounts for the “lacks and frailties” that inevitably accompany actual, not ideal, individual human beings.²⁹ Modesty is a middle way between, on the one hand, the harsh standards of truthfulness against which we and the Other always fall short, and on the other against holding no one accountable at all.

Modesty provides an indispensable condition for morality. Whereas truthfulness is rooted in honor, modesty is rooted in love, and “love does not require the fiction that all human beings are good. Were that the case there would be no method for the steady progress of moral self-consciousness [den stetigen Fortschritt des sittlichen Selbstbewusstseins].”³⁰ We make mistakes, we are imperfect, but with the virtue of modesty we can forgive ourselves our shortcomings— and there will always be shortcomings given that the ideal is impossible to achieve—because we realize that our Selves are works in progress. Modesty then serves two essential functions for Cohen. First, it helps prevent one from despairing of morality, both from one’s own failures and for the failures of the collective. Without modesty, the very rationality of the moral endeavor threatens to collapse. Second, modesty prevents hatred and undue scrutiny of the Other since it is firmly rooted to a belief in the rehabilitation and improvement of all human beings. Modesty “prevents the full identification of the judged action with the person [who performed said action].”³¹ For Cohen, all forms of unconditional condemnation against any human being are “not merely vulgar and abominable”— indeed, “nothing is more wicked.”³²

It is important to note that in the *Ethik*, Cohen draws a distinction between modesty (*Bescheidenheit*) and humility (*Demut*), which becomes a significant virtue in his later thought. Modesty, the main defense against hatred, allows one to guard oneself against jealousy by properly estimating one’s own worth in order to attend to the Other. In a manner more akin to Aristotle’s *Phronesis* than Levinas’s notion of limitless obligation to the Other, Cohen writes, “Modesty is selfrespect just as much as respect for the Other.”³³ Part of modesty is properly estimating the Other in regard to oneself, being neither too harsh nor too awed. Only in this manner can one extirpate jealousy, which Cohen thinks is one of the main roots of hatred.

Humility, however, at least in *Ethik des reinen Willens*, is a “fiction that operates with the feeling of one’s own shame [Unwert].”³⁴ Without a healthy sense of self-worth, the steady battle against jealousy is either not undertaken with sufficient seriousness because of the artificial nature of humility, or seen as utterly vain and hopeless, because, as “shameful” we lack the drive and ability to attempt it. Humility in the *Ethik* is construed as a sort of forfeiture of the moral endeavor due to a lack of sufficient hope in one’s role in “tolerable ethical existence.”³⁵ As we will see, Cohen’s estimation of humility changes in his engagement with Maimonides.

However, before we move to his later work, it is important to discuss a remarkable moment in the *Ethik*, in which Cohen reflects upon Judaism and antisemitism. Against the claims that Jews prize their “atavistic community” over national and international commitments, and indeed, all other human relations, Cohen makes an unexpected move. That is, given the tone of the rest of the text, one might expect that Cohen would insist that Judaism, like Christianity, represents a relative community (*relative Gemeinschaft*), which is to be subordinated to the *Allheit* of the ideal state.³⁶ And while Cohen ultimately concludes that it is the ethical state alone that can bind Jews and Christians together in harmony,³⁷ he nevertheless insists upon the distinguished nature of the Jewish prophetic tradition—still very much alive in Judaism—and its “messianic idea.” He states, “It is not the adherence to a tribe [Stamm] and a thousand year historical distinctiveness [Besonderheit], which is able to explain the historical riddle of the continued existence of the Jews. Rather, it is the force of the conviction that it is able to represent a form of true *Allheit* through this historical idea.”³⁸

What makes Cohen’s statement in regard to the Jews surprising then, is that in his endeavors to ground the Self in genuine *Allheit*, he laboriously roots out those forms of “false honor [falsche Ehre],” or “the honor of vanity [die Ehre der Eitelkeit],”³⁹ which place the individual and the society on false bearings as a result of a distorted view of the whole, i.e., an insufficiently rigorous notion of *Allheit*. In other words, false honor occurs when a relative community takes itself as genuinely universal. Indeed, when discussing why love cannot be the first-order virtue, he uses many examples from religion, “because religion has made love into its fundamental concept [Grundbegriffe].”⁴⁰ Thus it is surprising that he then suggests that Judaism, although a religion, nevertheless has some access to *Allheit* and therefore is not merely a form of culture “afflicted with myth,”⁴¹ whose “cultural maturity lies in ethics.”⁴²

Indeed, if read with sufficient care, one senses a genuine hostility to Christianity in Cohen’s writings. In fact, when Cohen initially explores the virtues and problematizes religion for having “made love into its fundamental concept,” it is Augustine’s notion of the love of God, not Maimonides’, that is brought into question.⁴³ Additionally, when Cohen discusses honor, he explains that it “has its moral origin [Ursprung] in the language of religion,” as originally denoting the “fear of God.” However, he is very quick to point out how Christianity erroneously translates this notion into “glory Herrlichkeit,” which ultimately results in the transference of the worth of human beings “into the *beyond*.”⁴⁴ It is Christianity, not Judaism, that is guilty of “false honor,” the “honor of vanity,”⁴⁵ and which has made the fateful error of mistaking itself for a universal community—a community founded upon *Allheit*—when in fact it is only a relative community. As a result, Christianity has generated an insufficiently rational basis for politics, ethics, and indeed, the very formation of selves, which has led to disastrous consequences historically.

Maimonides, God, and Judaism

While Cohen does not develop the relationship between Judaism and *Allheit* further in the *Ethik*, he increasingly emphasizes it in his later thought. Indeed, Cohen’s dialogue with Maimonides is inextricably

linked with his account of Judaism's relationship to *Allheit*. It is in his prolonged engagement with Maimonides' work that Cohen begins to think about ways in which God can remain at once the foundational hypothesis and thus ultimate "ground" of Truth while nevertheless playing a direct role in the ethical formation of the Self. In the *Ethik*, Cohen does not show much concern with the positive functions that Maimonides' "Attributenlehre" might take. Rather, the emphasis is primarily upon God as the *Urgrund* of truth, as transcendent to both the spheres of logic and ethics, as the hypothesis of their *Einklang*. While Cohen lauds the "Attributenlehre" of Maimonides for maintaining a "restriction of knowledge about God to those attributes which apply exclusively to human beings," his praise primarily emphasizes that this teaching does not impinge upon God's transcendence.⁴⁶

In *Ethics of Maimonides*, however, Cohen revisits Maimonides' "Attributenlehre" as a possible way to enable God to remain the *Urgrund* of Truth, and thus irreducible to either logic or ethics, while nevertheless exerting a direct influence upon ethics. Cohen insists that Maimonides' great contribution to the philosophy of religion lies in his concerted effort to shift focus away from metaphysical inquiry about God's essence, directing it instead towards the ethical relationship between God and human beings. Thus, "the concept of knowing God in Maimonides represents in substance exclusively the cognition of ethics."⁴⁷ This is indeed a departure from the *Ethik*, where it is the individual qua juridical person in relation to the ethical state that is the nexus in which the Self is constituted, as "not only the successful end" but also the "proper beginning" for the individual striving to constitute—and constituting in its striving—its ethical Self.⁴⁸ However, Judaism is not a national state; indeed, Cohen thinks it is meant to be stateless.

In his reading of Maimonides, Cohen finds a new function in the idea of God, that of the archetype for morality, which serves as a new route by which to access *Allheit*, one that bypasses the state. In this new reading, Cohen claims that for Maimonides "knowing God" is "exclusively the cognition of ethics. This is the reason why he could not conceive of the principle and problem of God apart from the principle and problem of man."⁴⁹ Cohen, via his reading of Maimonides, suggests that cognition of God constitutes a new way of conceptualizing the Self as ethical task, such that God qua ideal now serves as the "successful end" and "proper beginning." By claiming that the idea of God and the idea of the human being, that is, the moral Self, are inextricably bound up, Cohen does not deviate from his pronouncement on the second page of the *Ethik* that "*the object [Gegenstand] of ethics is the human being.*"⁵⁰ God too can play the role of the ideal, an entry point to *Allheit*, in order to subsequently ground the Self of ethics. It is in this light that we should read Cohen's statement in the *Ethics of Maimonides*, that "ethics constitutes the relationship between oneself and God, and as such the relationship between oneself and others as well as one's relationship to oneself."⁵¹ The idea of God is the *Grundlagen* of ethics and thus of our ethical relationships with Others.

Cohen is able to find such use in Maimonides because he denudes the medieval philosopher's thought of any metaphysical commitments, thus enabling his doctrine of the divine attributes to be read as purely functional. In this sense, Cohen's reading remains continuous with his previous discussion of Maimonides and the "Attributenlehre" in the *Ethik*. That is, Cohen reads Maimonides' limitation of human knowledge about divine attributes as sufficiently methodologically rigorous to prevent any compromise regarding God's transcendence by any metaphysical trait that would disrupt the correlation between logic and ethics constitutive of the *Urgrund* of truth upon which Cohen's entire critical idealist system is "founded." What is new, however, is the suggestion that the idea of God is sufficiently universal, indeed more universal than the ethical state, to serve as the ground and archetype for human morality. However, these attributes are understood not as disclosing God's metaphysical essence in itself but rather God's function as a moral

exemplar for the construction of the moral Self. Or, as Cohen puts it, “the postulate of knowing God is the *sine qua non* for [man’s] ethical subsistence. Hence it can only be cognition in which and by which man, emulating God’s actions, builds himself through his own conduct into an ethical person.”⁵²

But how, precisely, is God related to the construction of the moral Self ? This line of thinking is more fully developed in Cohen’s posthumously published *Religion*. It is essential to recognize that Cohen distinguishes two different levels when discussing God: Truth and holiness. Truth is the *Einklang* between logic and ethics, while holiness is God’s role in morality. As we will see, Truth is the highest embodiment of God, and thus truthfulness remains the highest virtue. However, it is in God’s holiness that we see God’s capacity to serve as “conceptually determined models for the action of human beings [die Musterbilder für die Handlung des Menschen].”⁵³ In short, God, not the state, in *Allheit* is, at least for the religious writings, the conceptual foundation for human action (*Handlung*) construed as the task of creating the Self qua ideal through the pure will (the central emphasis of the *Ethik*.) Indeed, Cohen’s very translation of Maimonides’s terminology השעמה יראות as “Attribute der Handlung” alludes to the project of the *Ethik*.⁵⁴

According to Cohen, Maimonides’ completely rethinks our relation to God in the “Attributes of Action” such that “the place of causality is . . . taken by purpose.”⁵⁵ Maimonides’ rationalism purifies Judaism from forms of love rooted in affect or in aesthetic voluptuousness, but rather roots it in ethical knowledge.⁵⁶ God now offers the foundation of action (*Handlung*) independent of the ideal state. Instead, God in the function of God’s holiness grounds the Self in *Allheit*, and thus secures the Self’s proper rootedness in ideality. Thus religion parallels ethics in that it too provides grounding for the ideal self. But just as love (even love of God as God of holiness) is the ground of virtues related to relative communities, honor along with its chief virtue, truthfulness, remains the utmost virtue in its connection with *Allheit*. It is at this point where Cohen’s new estimation of humility comes into play.

Reconfiguring Truthfulness and Modesty in a Religious Key

It is not uncommon to view Cohen’s turn in the *Religion* as but a new articulation of universal ethics in Jewish clothing. However, to offer such a reading is to fail to sufficiently recognize the specific function of humility vis-à-vis the Jews as a unique community, which Cohen terms a congregation (*Gemeinde*). As I mentioned earlier, already as early as the *Ethik*, the Jewish community, or congregation, is by no means to be understood as a relative community (*relative Gemeinschaft*) among others to be brought into accord with *Allheit*. Rather, it is “the original soil of the Kingdom of God [Urboden des Gottesreiches].”⁵⁷

In his introduction to the *Religion*, Cohen insists that ethics must maintain the distinction between “is” and “ought,” as the ethical form of knowing is rooted in this distinction, and that the moral Self consists in the striving to create itself in approximation of the ideal. However, for religion, “it must not be a matter of indifference whether my morality and all men’s morality remains dutiful striving only, sufficient in itself; rather, I have to take an interest in the question of whether the *ideal* has life and actuality.”⁵⁸ Since ethics is rooted in the distinction between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be, methodologically speaking ethics must “maintain the separation of actuality from the ideal, and generally between idea and actuality.” Religion stands in stark contrast to ethics in this sense. “The God of whom religion teaches means nothing else but the repeal of this kind of prejudice of ethical rigor” and demands with the prophets “the dominion of the good on earth.”⁵⁹ Indeed, it is by means of the congregation, the Jewish congregation, that Cohen reconciles God’s two functions, Truth and holiness, even if neither can be fully realized in actuality, and thus the reconciliation must remain perpetually in process.⁶⁰

In order to understand this shift we must understand what is at stake in this emphasis on the congregation. Cohen explains, "Truth and holiness would be identical if holiness did not limit itself to morality, while Truth unites the ideal of reason. Truth, therefore, is the binding link between science, including ethics, on the one hand, and religion, on the other. If man must ask for his highest good he must ask for truth."⁶¹ Even in the *Religion*, Cohen maintains the methodological distinction between ethics and logic. Thus, when Kenneth Seeskin explains that "there is only one law and one goal; what differences there are between ethics and religion have to do with the method we use to articulate them,"⁶² he can only be referring to God's holiness, which is God's function in regard to ethics. There remains God's Truth, which is the connection between logic and ethics.

It is precisely here that we see the new religious inflection of Cohen's virtues. Truthfulness then, is not a virtue derived from God's holiness (the construction of the ethical Self), but rather, "follows . . . as a consequence from God as the God of Truth."⁶³ "Jewish truthfulness," as Cohen terms it, is both related to truthfulness as conceived in the *Ethik* and yet it takes on a new dimension as well. To be sure, the definition from the *Ethik* still applies, that truthfulness is the rigorous demand for the perpetual purification of the Self through striving, self-examination, and the general "constant serious work of the self to implement itself in so far as it can make itself actual."⁶⁴ However, Jewish truthfulness is rooted in the "Unique God,"⁶⁵ such that truthfulness becomes a virtue for the Jewish people. Just as the Self is a task, so is the identity of the Jewish people as the "symbol" of "chosen mankind," which rigorously undergoes a "self-transformation [from] the chosen people" into a symbol of "messianic mankind."⁶⁶

Jewish truthfulness demands that "there can be only one unique worship of God, one unique love of God. . . . *Idolatry* has to be destroyed absolutely."⁶⁷ The True God demands "true worship,"⁶⁸ a requirement of which is the shaming of the idol worshipper.⁶⁹ True worship is not simply a critique of paganism *qua* non-Judaism, but rather a repudiation leveled against all forms of self-satisfaction, whether in the sacrificial cult or in the nation. Idolatry is everywhere, not simply in certain rituals and objects of worship, but more pointedly in pride and eudemonism, i.e., the basic failure to recognize the distinction between the actual and ideal.⁷⁰

It is precisely at this moment that Cohen's revised estimation of humility becomes evident. Humility is a virtue which prevents any pride on the part of the Jews vis-à-vis the Other. Cohen makes a great deal out of Maimonides' various discussions of humility. According to Daniel Frank, Maimonides' notion of humility is rooted in a critique of Aristotelian pride, which finds its justification in the recognition of one's peers. Frank notes that Maimonides' virtuous man, the *hasid*, "cares not a whit for what the human, all-too-human world, takes as significant," given that the source of morality is grounded upon knowledge of God, not the estimation of other people.⁷¹ Similarly, Cohen not only grounds the ultimate ethical foundations in knowledge of God, but also rejects the present in favor of the ideal of the future, the messianic. For Cohen, pride is contentment with the present, with one's self and the world as it currently is. This is the great sin, in that it is at odds with true knowledge of God, which entails that both one's self and the self of the Other are continually engaged in a process of creation and re-creation in light of the ethical ideal; they are perpetual tasks which are never fixed.

To be sure, modesty continues to maintain the same function as it did in the *Ethik*, as the virtue which provides "forbearance to my weakness, as well as the weakness of my fellowman,"⁷² such that I am not overly harsh in my judgment of myself or the Other. Thus modesty "becomes a support for my love of my

fellow man, as well as for my own moral self-esteem.”⁷³ However, we get a sense that this is no longer sufficient for Cohen. When touching on his famous and oft-discussed notion of repentance,⁷⁴ Cohen explains that “I must in various ways try to come to terms with myself, and for this I need the self-knowledge of modesty, which, in the presence of great questions, leads me to humility.”⁷⁵ To be sure, this quote is rather ambiguous but it at least suggests that humility is of greater depth than modesty.

We get further insight into the nature of humility a paragraph later, when Cohen writes, “Humility alone guards man from the danger of pride about his worth as man, a worth that is based only on his fear of God, on his submission to God’s truth.”⁷⁶ That is, if the Jews are the carriers of God’s truth and their task is to shame the idolaters, it seems natural that they will become proud and have disdain for the Other. Indeed, theorists such as Jan Assmann and Regina Schwartz have explored this attitude of religious superiority in regard to the Abrahamic monotheisms to great controversy in recent years.⁷⁷ However, with the “Jewish” virtue (and I use this both in the sense that Cohen thinks that this is a virtue cultivated by Jewish texts and that it is a communal virtue exhibited by the idealized Jewish people) of humility counteracts such antagonistic attitudes towards the Other as rooted in pride, and thus being itself idolatrous. Indeed, shame itself is part of the process of truthfulness, which is, in turn, bound to the virtue of honor.

To understand humility and its Jewishness, we must return to the *Ethik*. In the *Ethik*, Cohen discusses the importance of a criminal (*Verbrecher*) autonomously accepting his punishment, a process through which “the moral self-consciousness [i.e., moral Self] is reclaimed [das sittliche Selbstbewusstsein wird wiedergewonnen].”⁷⁸ Cohen further explains that it is “the great achievement of punishment for the moral Self of the criminal that he begins to lose the consciousness and character of the criminal with the onset of punishment.”⁷⁹ For Cohen in the *Ethik*, when the criminal recognizes his transgressions and willingly accepts punishments for them, he is thereby freed of his guilt for them. Since the Self is a task, one is able to reclaim one’s Self and begin again with the process of striving for the ideal by accepting punishment. Indeed, Cohen’s later thought capitalizes on this basic concept in that sin, its recognition and atonement, is the gateway to the discovery of the Self and its freedom.⁸⁰

While the discussion of the criminal, like the discussion of the Jews and *Allheit*, is only an excursus in the *Ethik*, it comes to full fruition in Cohen’s *Religion*. No longer operating in the context of the state but rather in conjunction with God’s holiness, which is inextricably bound up with God’s Truth, Cohen turns to Jewish sources to rethink the relationship between guilt and suffering. Once again, Maimonides is the decisive figure in mediating/rationalizing the Jewish tradition for Cohen. Not only is Maimonides the thinker who, at least in Cohen’s estimation, provides the conditions for thinking through God as both the *Einklang* of logic and ethics (and thus as Truth), as well as God as the moral exemplar, the ethical ideal by virtue of the attributes of action, i.e., as holiness, but he also establishes a basis through which these two functions correspond. For Cohen, Maimonides discovers this correspondence with the “profound idea that Job is also a prophet, that suffering is a genuine form of prophecy,” because “suffering is a force in God’s plan of salvation.” However, like the punishment for the criminal in the *Ethik*, the suffering only has meaning if one autonomously accepts it. Unlike the criminal who suffers to reclaim himself, in this case, “the sufferer is considered as suffering for the sake of Others.”⁸¹ Again, this implies a switch from mythical/metaphysical thinking, where one suffers because one did something wrong, to a monotheistic/ ethical framework where one is focused on the telos or end towards which one suffers.

The Jews willingly suffer as a testimony to the deepest grounds of Truth, the reality of the ideal. Jewish statelessness is only a tragedy from the vantage point of a pragmatic, eudaemonist framework. In fact, however, “he who recognizes the world-historical idea of messianic mankind as the task of the Jewish people must recognize in Jewish history the signpost of this goal.”⁸² The Jewish congregation, as an embodiment of humility, suffers as a testimony against “the acceptance of superficial human reality as displayed in power, in splendor, in success, in dominion, in autocracy, in imperialism; as an opposition to all these signs of human arrogance, to vain pride and to presumption.”⁸³ In short, humility is the great “Jewish” virtue insofar as it is the radical rejection of idolatry, whose modern form is all these expressions of “human arrogance” and the failure to recognize the ethical ideal. Humility is no longer an impediment to ethics as it was in the *Ethik*, but now part of the world-historical process of redemption.

When referring to Deutero-Isaiah, Cohen even goes so far as to claim that “*in suffering for the peoples Israel acquires the right to convert them*. [. . .] This historical suffering of Israel gives it its historical dignity, its tragic mission, which represents its share in the divine education of mankind.”⁸⁴ Whereas in the *Ethik* the criminal must voluntarily suffer his punishment to become free, here the Jew suffers vicariously for the guilt/blindness of the Other. Indeed, Cohen reads the story of Jesus’ suffering and death as vicarious atonement for the Other as distinctly Jewish. In fact, it “anticipated the history of the ‘remnant of Israel.’ And hence, according to this original poetic image, the historical Christ is actually the history of Israel.”⁸⁵ However, unlike the coupling of guilt and atonement in Christianity, in Cohen’s Platonic account of Judaism, guilt is inextricably tied to a lack of knowledge. The suffering of the Jews, then, does not so much take away the guilt of the Other—indeed, they merely suffer for the guilt of the Other, they do not provide atonement—but in this suffering they testify to an order of Truth which the Other ought to recognize but does not. (At least the Other does not recognize it yet.) And without this recognition, without this Truth, the Other will continue to be stunted as she lacks genuine access to *Allheit*. And thus the Jew suffers in bearing witness to the order of the ideal, to Truth.

To be sure, while Cohen stresses that religion, unlike ethics, demands that the gap between “is” and “ought” be closed, this demand does not imply that this gap will actually be closed. Rather, it suggests that Judaism in its deep rationality recognizes that an asymmetrical responsibility for the welfare of all other peoples is thrust upon it. That is, the Jews must suffer for the Other, to shame the Others, in the sense of making them aware of their ignorance so that they can renew the task of refining their moral Selves upon proper foundations.

Judaism is not, however, identical with the religion of reason, because Judaism must be idealized. This means both that the sources as they exist must be read through an idealizing hermeneutic which optimizes their ethical possibilities, and that the empirical Jewish people cannot possibly live up to the ideal of the congregation. Indeed, Cohen would be remiss to limit the idealized congregation to Jews. As he explains, the idealization of the Jewish people, as the bearers of monotheism, “has already received into its bosom ‘*the pious of the peoples of the world*’ ” who “have their fully entitled share in this messianic suffering.”⁸⁶ In short, Cohen’s discussion of Judaism is such that he does not equate Judaism and the religion of reason not only because that would eliminate the gap between “is” and “ought,” but also because Cohen’s expansive, inclusivist definition of Judaism renders the Other as a Jew when she acts in accordance with the religion of reason. When the Other acts in accordance with the virtue of humility, she testifies to the reality of the ideal in spite of the all too immoral world. That is, *she is Jewish* regardless of her professed empirical religion.

Maimonides and Cohen: A Final Thought

Cohen's evolving engagement with Maimonides is undoubtedly complex and multifaceted but reveals that his embrace of Judaism was not a break with idealism, nor a sudden reversal. Rather, already in the *Ethik* Cohen attributes a unique role to the Jews and refuses to relativize them as one community among others. It is in his prolonged engagement with Maimonides' thought that Cohen works out the vocabulary, particularly the increased predominance of humility, to offer a justification of Judaism that stresses its uniqueness and the continued relevance of its world-historical mission without sacrificing ethical rigor.

Notes

I would like to thank Martin Kavka and Aaron Hughes for reading earlier versions of this essay and offering helpful comments. I would also like to thank Hartwig Wiedebach for reading this essay and offering many valuable suggestions for revision.

¹ Arthur Hyman, "Maimonidean Elements in Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion," in *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism*, ed. Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 359.

² Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, 2nd rev. ed. (1907; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1981). Note that I frequently refer to this as the *Ethik* and I will abbreviate it in the footnotes as *ErW*.

³ Hermann Cohen, "Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," in *Jüdische Schriften*, ed. Bruno Strauss (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke, 1924), vol. 3. Translated by Almut Sh. Bruckstein as *Ethics of Maimonides* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

⁴ Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, 2nd ed. (Cologne: Joseph Melzer Verlag, 1959). Translated by Simon Kaplan as *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). Note that I will frequently refer to this book as "the *Religion*" or "the *Religion of Reason*" and will abbreviate the German title as *RdV*.

⁵ Given Cohen's penchant for using italics, when quoting Cohen I will only italicize those German words that Cohen italicizes.'

⁶ Cohen, *ErW*, 453.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 428.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 459.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁰ To denote this specific connotation of *Wahrheit* I will translate it as "Truth" with a *T*.

¹¹ Cohen, *ErW*, 441.

¹² *Ibid.*, 89. On the significance of the term *Einklang*, see Peter A. Schmid, *Ethik als Hermeneutik: Systematische Untersuchung zu Hermann Cohens Rechts- und Tugendlehre* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1995), 220–21.

¹³ Cohen, *ErW*, 441.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Schmid highlights this hermeneutical function of the idea of God nicely when he stresses, "Er ist in diesem Sinne nur die systematische Grundidee der Übereinstimmung der Glieder des Systems. Er bildet die höchste Hypothese, von der her die Einheit des Systems in seiner Geschiedenheit gedacht werden kann. Er bleibt ein transzendentes Prinzip und nimmt keinen direkten Einfluss auf Natur und Sittlichkeit. Damit wird klar, dass die Gottesidee in der Ethik vorab nur eine methodisch-systematische Dimension hat." Schmid, *Ethik als Hermeneutik*, 221.

¹⁶ Cohen, *ErW*, 436.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 453–54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 453.

- ²⁰ On Cohen's critique of Kant in regard to autonomy and law, see Robert Gibbs's excellent essay, "Jurisprudence Is the Organon of Ethics: Kant and Cohen on Ethics, Law, and Religion," in *Munk, Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism*, 193–230.
- ²¹ Cohen, *ErW*, 339.
- ²² I am choosing to retain the German *Allheit* rather than use the traditional translation, "totality." I am hesitant to use "totality" given the pejorative valence it has taken on in the critiques of Levinas and other poststructuralist thinkers of Hegelianism and modern thought. *Allheit* in Cohen's sense is quite distinct from the reading of the Hegelian totalizing manner of philosophizing that the poststructuralists critique. Rather, with Cohen, *Allheit* is an ideal of a unified humanity, which in *Ethik des reinen Willens* takes place through a cosmopolitan, legal confederation of states that is always to-come. This vision, even as early as the *Ethik*, is closely associated with the messianic vision of the Hebrew prophets, and this association becomes even more explicit in his later writings.
- ²³ Cohen, *ErW*, 7.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 494.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 499.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 500.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 500.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 501.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 532.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 532.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 548.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 551.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 550.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 549.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 550.
- ³⁶ As opposed to the ideal ethical state, for Cohen "Die Gemeinschaft ist Mehrheit" (*ErW* 484). And given its status as *Mehrheit*, it is inherently relative.
- ³⁷ Cohen, *ErW* 496.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 496.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 494.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 482.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 586.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 586. See Andrea Poma's discussion of the evolving role of religion in Cohen's thought in *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 157–70; and "Correlation in Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion: A Method and More than a Method," *Yearning for Form and Other Essays on Hermann Cohen's Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 61–87.
- ⁴³ Cohen, *ErW*, 482–84. For a discussion of Cohen's critique of Love as foundational concept in *ErW*, see Schmid, *Ethik als Hermeneutik*, 241–56.
- ⁴⁴ Cohen, *ErW*, 491.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 494.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 453.
- ⁴⁷ Cohen, "Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," 268; *Ethics of Maimonides*, 132.
- ⁴⁸ Cohen, *ErW*, 7.
- ⁴⁹ Cohen, "Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," 268; *Ethics of Maimonides*, 132.
- ⁵⁰ Cohen, *ErW*, 2.
- ⁵¹ Cohen, "Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," 268; *Ethics of Maimonides*, 132.
- ⁵² Cohen, "Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," 247; *Ethics of Maimonides*, 74. See Martin Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 114.
- ⁵³ Cohen, *RdV*, 110; *Religion*, 95.

- ⁵⁴ Cohen, *RdV*, 109; *Religion*, 94. Note that in the *Ethics of Maimonides*, Cohen makes the important transition from his discussion in the *Ethik*, such that Maimonides' "Attributenlehre" now have a positive function, grounding a sort of morality, as being "Attributes of Action [Attribute der Handlung]" ("Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," 246; *Ethics of Maimonides*, 71). That is, the emphasis is now on *Handlung* as the task of constructing the Self that Cohen discusses so much in the *Ethik*.
- ⁵⁵ Cohen, *RdV*, 109; *Religion*, 94.
- ⁵⁶ I do not mean to imply that Cohen is dismissive of aesthetics. Indeed, Cohen makes such aesthetic elements as lyrical yearning and unity of the heart central to his account of Judaism. However, Cohen's relationship to aesthetics is very complicated, and he writes voluminously about this topic. Needless to say, I cannot explore the important relationship between aesthetics and religion further in this essay.
- ⁵⁷ Cohen, *RdV*, 448; *Religion*, 385.
- ⁵⁸ Cohen, *RdV*, 24; *Religion*, 20–21.
- ⁵⁹ Cohen, *RdV*, 24; *Religion*, 21. Rosenzweig saw in this a shift to a belief in a personal God, and suggests, perhaps in bad faith, a belief in naïve messianism on Cohen's part. On this point, see Steven S. Schwarzschild's important piece, "Franz Rosenzweig's Anecdotes about Hermann Cohen," in *Gegenwart im Rückblick: Festgabe für die Jüdische Gemeinde zu Berlin, 25 Jahre nach dem Neubeginn*, ed. H. A. Strauss and K. Grossman (Heidelberg: L. Stiehm, 1970), 209–18.
- ⁶⁰ Thus, I agree with Robert Gibbs when he says: "Cohen emphatically rejects [the] analogy between the religious society and the political state. Moreover, he boldly claims that the Jewish religion has abandoned what for Kant must be a ground, a political state. Indeed, the argument in Cohen's *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* moves sharply against or at least in tension with that of his *Ethik*, whose argument held emphatically for the state. The situation of the Jews, according to Cohen—who was no Zionist—was that they had abandoned the dependency of the state in biblical times. That they maintained a society without the state depended on a different institution, one that Cohen calls the congregation (*Gemeinde*), which is a German rendering of the Hebrew *kahal*. But such an institution is not a church, which is analogous to the state" (Gibbs, "Jurisprudence," 221–22). My only minor quibble is that Cohen was already showing signs of this tension in regard to the limits of the State and the uniqueness of Judaism in the *Ethik*; cf. Hartwig Wiedebach, *Die Bedeutung der Nationalität für Hermann Cohen* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1997), 219–318.
- ⁶¹ Cohen, *RdV*, 441; *Religion*, 380. I have made slight emendations to Kaplan's translation.
- ⁶² Kenneth Seeskin, *Autonomy and Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 159.
- ⁶³ Cohen, *RdV*, 481; *Religion*, 415.
- ⁶⁴ Cohen, *ErW*, 501.
- ⁶⁵ Cohen, *RdV*, 485; *Religion*, 418.
- ⁶⁶ Cohen, *RdV*, 487; *Religion*, 420.
- ⁶⁷ Cohen, *RdV*, 60; *Religion*, 52.
- ⁶⁸ Cohen, *RdV*, 482; *Religion*, 415.
- ⁶⁹ On Cohen's account of the evolution of intolerance towards idolatry, see Robert Erlewine, "Hermann Cohen and the Humane Intolerance of Ethical Monotheism," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (2008): 148–73.
- ⁷⁰ See Cohen, "Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," 269–70; *Ethics of Maimonides*, 139–40.
- ⁷¹ Daniel Frank, "Humility as a Virtue: A Maimonidean Critique of Aristotle's Ethics," *Moses Maimonides and His Time* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1989), 97.
- ⁷² Cohen, *RdV*, 493; *Religion*, 424.
- ⁷³ Cohen, *RdV*, 493; *Religion*, 425.
- ⁷⁴ The best account of this remains Michael Zank, *The Idea of Atonement in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000).

- ⁷⁵ Cohen, *RdV*, 493; *Religion*, 425.
- ⁷⁶ Cohen, *RdV*, 493; *Religion*, 425.
- ⁷⁷ Again, see Erlewine, “Hermann Cohen and the Humane Intolerance of Ethical Monotheism.”
- ⁷⁸ Cohen, *ErW*, 378.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ See Zank, *The Idea of Atonement*.
- ⁸¹ Cohen, *RdV*, 265; *Religion*, 227.
- ⁸² Cohen, *RdV*, 312; *Religion*, 267.
- ⁸³ Cohen, *RdV*, 310; *Religion*, 265.
- ⁸⁴ Cohen, *RdV*, 330; *Religion*, 283.
- ⁸⁵ Cohen, *RdV*, 508; *Religion*, 439–40.
- ⁸⁶ Cohen, *RdV*, 313; *Religion*, 268.