The ethical idealism and prophetic messianism of Hermann Cohen

By Richard Mather

Hermann Cohen (1842 – 1918) was a German-Jewish philosopher, one of the founders of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism and an intellectual precursor to the 20th century Jewish existentialist humanism of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas. Starting from the proposition that ethics had to be universal, Cohen outlined a Kantian (and non-Marxist) ethical socialism rooted in the prophetic vision of the Hebrew bible.

Universal ethics

Hermann Cohen agreed with Immanuel Kant that ethics must be directed towards the well-being of humanity. The essential feature of this is its *universality*. As Cohen saw it, progress was (or at least ought to be) moving towards universal suffrage and democratic socialism. Following Kant, Cohen defended the so-called categorical imperative; that we should treat humanity in other persons *always as an end and never as a means only*. (Kant's famous definition of the categorical imperative is to "act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.")

The categorical imperative contains, in Cohen's words, "the moral progress of a new era and the entire future world history." Although Cohen's socialism owed more to Kant and the Hebrew prophets than it did to Karl Marx, he was nevertheless critical of capitalism because the individual worker runs the risk of being treated as a mere means for the ends of the employer.

Judaism as the religion of reason

According to Cohen, the human desire for universal ethics is the foundation for religious belief. God is the eternal source of moral law and provides humankind with the imperative to act ethically.

Cohen proclaimed Judaism as the historical source of the idea that humanity can be unified by a single set of ethical laws. He defined Judaism as a "religion of reason" — a revealed type of rationality. And since reason is something that belongs to all people everywhere, a religion of reason must therefore posit a single, unique God for all humanity. In short, a religion of reason must be monotheistic.

Judaism, as interpreted by Cohen, is a set of rational principles that are grounded in God. Not only is revelation given through reason, but a rational religion is necessarily a moral religion. As Kenneth Seeskin describes it in his book *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, "God represents the highest moral standard possible: a being who wills the moral law for its own sake all the time."

To know God is to accept the duty of fulfilling the moral law, and this involves imitating God's attributes of mercy and forgiveness. In other words, holiness is morality.

Messianism

Cohen believed that it is the duty of the Jewish people to teach universal ethics and he cited the Seven Noahide Laws (the Seven Laws of Noah) as an example of a universally-applicable moral code that is rooted in the bible and in rabbinical thought. It is Judaism's role to point to the ideal of fulfilled humanity and to draw others to it. Cohen asserted that "the general love for mankind is the messianic consequence of monotheism, for which the love of the stranger paved the way."

Interestingly, Cohen played down the notion of brotherly love as the underlying principle of the biblical commandment to love one's neighbor. He instead identified law as the basis of the moral subject. Although "neighbor" in German has generally been understood as "one who is near," Cohen argued that "neighbor" should be translated as "Other" or "Another." As such, a man's "neighbour" is actually the stranger or foreigner. We are commanded to protect the stranger because we are all equal before the law. As Jean-Paul Sartre was to write in *Being and Nothingness*, "To live in a world haunted by my neighbour is … to encounter the Other at every turn of the road."

According to Cohen, since Jewish monotheism has an ethical dimension, it inevitably culminates in what he characterizes as prophetic messianism, which is "the dominion of the good on earth."

He added: "Morality will be established in the human world. Against this confidence, no skepticism, no pessimism, no mysticism, no metaphysics, no experience of the world, no knowledge of men, no tragedy, and no comedy can prevail."

For Cohen, messianism was no longer a hope for God to intervene in history. In fact, he dismissed the notion of a miraculous coming of the messiah. Messianism is simply a factor in world history. Rather than being a supernatural or eschatological event, it is an expression of faith that humanity is making progress towards the end of injustice. If the messianic future can be thought of as eternal, it is only in the sense that the progress of mankind and world history are eternal.

Ethics, law and autonomy

Convinced that ethics must be law-based, and that law and the State must be restored to the realm of ethics, Cohen called for legal rights to be the duty and goal of economic and cultural life. Indeed, in Cohen's system of ethical jurisprudence, morality, rights and the law are very closely intertwined. Ethics must find its completion in the philosophy of law.

For Cohen, the ethical subject is a legal subject. Man is a moral actor when his actions can be held accountable in court and when he can claim or bring an action for his rights. As Robert Gibbs explains in his essay "Jurisprudence is the Organon of Ethics," "action means not a claim simply to a right, but a claim to bring the claim to court." Cohen's assertion that each person not only has a claim to his rights but "the claim to a court's judgement" should be seen in the context of the Seven Noahide Laws because one of those laws is the commandment to establish courts of justice.

Cohen was concerned that legality had for too long been empty of ethical content, partly as a result of the Apostle Paul's polemics. Indeed, Cohen was highly critical of those who pursue a definition of legality that is divorced from what Gibbs terms "the inner freedom and ethical insight of duty done for its own sake." By creating a suspicion of law by splitting it away from ethics, the likes of Apostle Paul and Martin Luther contributed to an unfortunate caricature of the Torah as emptily legalistic.

In Cohen's view, the law becomes self-contradictory when ethics and legality are severed, and that is because we are left with laws *arising through force*. When legality is separated from the notion of duty done for its own sake, the only recourse by the State is coercion. When divorced from ethics, the law has to be imposed from the outside *because it is no longer in our hearts and minds*. The ethical-legal subject cannot be a free moral agent if he is coerced by the State into acting ethically.

Ethics, then, must unite inner freedom and law. Autonomy means we are free, but with respect to our will this means only that we may "impose on it a universal law" — the law of the categorical imperative. As Kenneth Seeskin points out in his book *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy,* "[I]n the [Kantian] kingdom of ends, where everyone is rational and every subject's humanity is respected, no one will follow any orders other than the ones she imposes on herself."

So it seems that the ethical state is where the will of the individual finds the full meaning and expression of his or her freedom, protected from compulsion by the State. Andrea Poma, in her excellent book *Yearning for Form,* explains it thus:

"From the ethical viewpoint, however, this individual is, in the situation described, the bearer of the authority of the law; therefore he represents the State, and opposes any powerful, violent subject, though devoid of all authority, since the law only receives authority from itself: it produces the ethical subject and only this task justifies it."