

Dialogue

<http://journals.cambridge.org/DIA>

Additional services for **Dialogue**:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Lectures on the History of Moral and Political Philosophy G.A. COHEN; EDITED BY JONATHAN WOLFF Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014; v + 360 pp. \ \$35.00 (hardback)

KYLE JOHANSEN

Dialogue / Volume 53 / Issue 03 / September 2014, pp 575 - 577

DOI: 10.1017/S0012217314000171, Published online: 04 March 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0012217314000171

How to cite this article:

KYLE JOHANSEN (2014). Dialogue, 53, pp 575-577 doi:10.1017/S0012217314000171

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Lectures on the History of Moral and Political Philosophy

G.A. COHEN; EDITED BY JONATHAN WOLFF

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014; v + 360 pp. \$35.00 (hardback)

doi:10.1017/S0012217314000171

It's here! Part three of G.A. Cohen's posthumously published trilogy of anthologies is now available. Whereas the first volume is comprised of previously uncollected essays in contemporary political philosophy; and the second consists of less formal, oft times personal writings on topics within and outside of philosophy; this volume, as its title suggests, contains Cohen's lectures (and other work) on the history of moral and political philosophy. This time influential philosopher and former Cohen supervisee Jonathan Wolff had the presumed pleasure of editing an assortment of stimulating, clearly written, and frequently humorous writings by one of Canada's most prominent political philosophers.

Lectures on the History of Moral and Political Philosophy is organized into three sections. The first is comprised of seven lectures, each of which is devoted to the work of one or more major figures in the history of philosophy. The second contains five previously published papers, all of which (except for the last) are from Cohen's corpus of writings in analytic Marxism. Of those papers "The Workers and the Word: Why Marx Had the Right to Think He Was Right" is especially worthy of attention, as it was originally published in the Yugoslavian journal *Praxis* and, as a result, has been difficult to access as of late. The third section contains a memoir of Cohen written by Wolff himself for the *Proceedings of the British Academy*.

At least two general features of Cohen's lectures are worthy of comment. First, a distinctive feature of Cohen's approach to the history of philosophy is his level of critical engagement with it. Though proper respect for the importance of exposition and historical context is displayed throughout, many of his lectures devote considerable space to testing the plausibility of the positions discussed. Perhaps the most dramatic example is his lecture, "Hume's Critique of Locke on Contract". In the preceding lecture, Cohen subjects Locke's understanding of consent to some critical scrutiny of his own. He notes that the manner in which one consents to something (expressly vs. tacitly) is seemingly irrelevant to the obligations thus generated, and furthermore, that obeying the laws of the state while residing within its jurisdiction presumably suffices

Dialogue 53 (2014), 575–581.

© Canadian Philosophical Association/Association canadienne de philosophie 2014

for the maintenance of social order. Given these two premises, why is it the case that those who offer express consent, as opposed to tacit, thereby waive their right to exit (117)? What's more, with respect to tacit consent, Cohen argues that an individual's use of public property is a tenuous basis upon which to attribute it (118-9). As critical of Locke as Cohen is, however, he is even more critical of Hume's criticisms. After chastising Hume for failing to address Locke's argument for the thesis that consent is necessary for legitimacy (121), he claims that Hume (ironically) commits the is/ought fallacy (123-5),¹ expresses an implausible intellectual conservatism that is inconsistent with his own moral philosophy (125-7), "carelessly" misses the fact that only express consent allegedly entails waiving one's right to exit (128), etc. Rarely is a philosopher so critical of a critique that targets a position of which she/he is also quite critical.

Another distinctive feature of Cohen's lectures is their focus on concepts and distinctions that he himself found especially interesting. The resulting loss of comprehensiveness is arguably a shortcoming. If it is, though, then it is offset by a second result: some of what Cohen discusses in his lectures is further developed in his published work. Given Cohen's prominence in contemporary political philosophy, the insight his lectures provide into his research is sufficient reason for them to warrant a close reading.

An example worth highlighting is the connection between Cohen's lecture, "Hobbes," and his previously published piece, "Reason, Humanity, and the Moral Law" (which appears as Chapter 12 in this volume). Near the end of the lecture, Cohen unveils an apparent inconsistency within Hobbes' treatment of self-made law. On the one hand, Hobbes claims that that the people are obligated to obey the sovereign's laws in part because the sovereign is their representative and thus his laws are, in a sense, their laws. On the other hand, Hobbes also claims that the sovereign is exempt from the laws he creates precisely because he is their author (98-101). To remove the inconsistency, Cohen initially asserts that Hobbes should have dropped the sovereign's exemption (102). However, in "Reason, Humanity, and the Moral Law," Cohen suggests a different answer. Hobbes' views on the sovereign and political obligation can be reconciled if it is allowed that the sovereign is bound by, but has the power to repeal, his own laws. With this modification in hand, it can be said that the sovereign, like the people, is bound by his laws, but unlike the people, is in a sense free from those laws because he has the power to repeal them (305-8). This solution prompts a question, however. If direct authorship of a law both binds the author and gives her/him power over it, then what does that imply for Kantian moral theories? How can Kantians retain the conclusion that moral agents author the moral law and yet lack the power to choose and subsequently modify its content as they see fit? Though Cohen thinks Kant has a way out via the necessity reason imposes (308-9), he argues that Christine Korsgaard's reliance on practical identity makes her vulnerable (309-23).

The lecture, "Plato and His Predecessors," is also worthy of attention because of its connection with Cohen's published work. In this lecture, Cohen's primary focus is the distinction between nature and convention. However, various comments over the course of his discussion exhibit ideas further developed in his late career critique of the

¹ To be fair, though, Cohen also provides a reconstruction of Hume's 'what actually happens in practice' criticism that avoids the is/ought fallacy; is allegedly an accurate interpretation of what Hume is sometimes saying; and is, according to Cohen, "a good challenge to the claim that legitimacy requires consent ..." (125).

constructivist concept of justice. A clear instance of his embryonic thoughts on the matter appears in his discussion of Platonic justice. Here, Cohen notes two apparent difficulties. First, Plato seems to be employing two distinct conceptions of justice: justice as “psychic harmony” (43), which is exemplified by the claim that justice obtains when the philosopher kings devote their lives to contemplating the forms; and justice as reciprocity, which is exemplified by the claim that the philosopher kings are obligated to govern the state. Second, these two conceptions of justice are seemingly in conflict: insofar as the philosopher kings devote themselves to governing, they consequently divert themselves from contemplating the forms (40-3). His preferred solution is to draw a distinction between fundamental and applied justice. The second conception of justice is not in tension with the first, he claims, if it is interpreted as an account of what fundamental justice (psychic harmony) requires in practice (the promotion of psychic harmony in society’s lower echelons via governance) (45).²

With respect to Wolff’s editorship, his footnotes afford the reader useful information about the text of the lectures and how Cohen himself regarded them. Furthermore, the memorial he wrote and included at the end provides a helpful overview of the different phases of Cohen’s research career and valuable insight into how these phases relate to each other (in fact, I think reading the memorial first gives one a better appreciation for what’s encountered throughout the rest of the volume).

Lectures on the History of Moral and Political Philosophy is worth the read for anyone interested in better understanding either the history of normative philosophy or Cohen’s own work in contemporary political philosophy. All things considered, I highly recommend it.

² For further development of the distinction between fundamental and applied justice, see G.A. Cohen, Chapters 6 and 7.

Reference

Cohen, G.A.

2008 *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

KYLE JOHANNSEN *Queen’s University*

Integrity and the Virtues of Reason: Living a Convincing Life

GREG SCHERKOSKE

Cambridge University Press, 2013; v + 213 pp. \$99.00 (hardback)

doi:10.1017/S0012217314000195

Why do we seek out the advice, counsel and guidance of those we deem to have integrity? Consider these “data points,” as Scherkoske calls them in his provocative new book: persons of integrity are usually held to be resolute in their convictions, responsive to reasons, morally “sane,” truthful, internally coherent, and more (6-8). These intuitions about agents with integrity do not always fit together, however, which is why Scherkoske