

# The correlation of science and ethics in Hermann Cohen's philosophy

By *Richard Mather*

Hermann Cohen made a distinction between the logic of science and the ideal of ethics, and noted that the natural world and the world of ethics are perceived very differently. This is because the order of the physical world is unchangeable (e.g, the sun sets in the west, night follows day, etc), while in the ideal world ethical rules can be accepted or rejected. It seems there should be one explanation for science, which is empirically self-evident, and another for ethics, which is something that is open to debate. Cohen reasoned there must be something that allows science and ethics to coexist and interrelate.

Cohen's answer was to call on God as the inevitable and ultimate ideal coincidence of what *is* (science, nature) with what *ought to be* (ethics). Or to put it another way, God is the eventual coincidence of human culture with nature; the real with the ideal. And because God stands outside nature and ethics, He points to the rapprochement between *is* and *ought*, thereby helping to bring about moral action in the world, the same moral action that is recommended by the Hebrew prophets as seen through the prism of the Kantian categorical imperative.

As Andrea Poma explains in *Yearning for Form and Other Essays on Hermann Cohen's Thought*, the advantage of having a transcendent God is that neither nature nor morality can claim priority over the other, meaning that just as ethics must conform to science, so science must conform to ethics. Poma adds: "The idea of God establishes this connection [between nature and morality] securely. This connection, this unity is grounded in the two members of the system of philosophy, in accordance with its distinction from identity."

For Cohen, then, scientific praxis and moral praxis must become reciprocal. Furthermore, and congruent with Cohen's own prophetic messianism, it is in the future that ethical principles will be fully realized, at which time the ethical will merge with the ontological, so that being and morality no longer contradict each other. As Phillip Homburg remarks in *Towards a Benjaminian Critique of Hermann Cohen's Logical Idealism*, Cohen aims "to assign ethics a status that raises it to the same level of dignity as the concepts of logic or mathematics."

As well as bridging science and ethics, the Cohenian notion of correlation extends to the relationship between mankind and God. For Cohen, humans are rational creatures, and our ability to reason demands a particular kind of relationship with God. In fact, God's awakening of reason in humans *is* God's revelation to humanity; reason is how God communicates with mankind. (As a neo-Kantian, Cohen knows that reason is our faculty of making inferences, allowing us to move from the particular and contingent to the global and universal.)

It is important to note that the correlative relationship between God and humanity (which Cohen characterizes as the 'Holy Spirit' or 'Spirit of Holiness') is respectful of God's separateness. As Norman Solomon explains in his essay "Cohen on Atonement, Purification and Repentance," God and man in Cohen's system of thought are "the inevitable counterpart of the other, mirroring but not merging." Solomon goes on to say that merging "would obliterate the distinctiveness of God and human; it would verge on pantheism. God's holiness demands human holiness as its correlate."

Indeed, Solomon is right to refer to the bogeyman of pantheism because Cohen was markedly antagonistic towards the pantheistic doctrine that identifies God with the universe (or regards the universe as a manifestation of God). Cohen was adamant that while God is the capstone of both logic and ethics, He nevertheless transcends both. Cohen had nothing but disdain for any

form of pantheism or mysticism in which God is equated with the world. In this respect, Cohen was very different from Spinoza, for whom God and Nature are virtually synonymous.

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To recap part two of this series on Cohen's thought, we see that Cohen defined God as the synthesis (albeit a *transcendent* synthesis) of nature and ethics, which will ultimately unify all humanity into a Kantian "kingdom of ends," a world in which all human beings are treated as ends in themselves and not the mere means to an end for other people. The realization of the ideal, which is grounded in God and finds its ultimate fulfilment in Him, is mankind's historic task, his ethical project.

And since the ethical task is distinguished from the immutable logic of being, the ethical task-as-project is thus not determined, only envisioned and recommended by the Hebrew prophets. As such, the ethical task is free to become realized by human beings. While for Sartre, the undefined, non-determined nature of man can never coincide with the brute reality of being-in-itself, for Cohen, the closing of the gap between the real and the ideal is mankind's historical task, and he envisioned Judaism as fundamental to this duty.