

5. Neo-Kantianism

I

While idealism was flourishing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the English speaking world, there emerged a “back to Kant” movement in Germany. The new Kantians de-emphasized the role of theoretical reason and synthesis in religious thought, and under the influence of Kant and Lotze sought to provide a new interpretation of religion in keeping with an emphasis upon the practical reason, the moral life and the emerging empirical age. Neo-Kantianism was the dominant philosophical force in Germany from approximately 1865 to 1920, and by the end of the century most of the chairs of philosophy in Germany were held by followers of Kant. Neo-Kantianism was born of an attitude which found in German Idealism justification for Kant’s suspicions of knowledge in metaphysics and a desire to be scientific without falling into the arms of dogmatic materialism. It produced many important scholarly works on Kant and a diversity of viewpoints which shared the spirit if not always the letter of Kant. The two primary Neo-Kantian schools are generally known as the Marburg School, and the Baden or Southwest German School. The Marburg School was concerned for the most part with logical, epistemological and methodological themes, and the Southwest German School focused more on value questions.

Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), who was appointed Professor of Philosophy at Marburg University in 1876, is considered the leading member of the Marburg School. Although Cohen is most widely known among philosophers as an interpreter of Kant and a philosopher interested in logical and epistemological subjects, he was deeply devoted to Judaism and sought to work out the implications of his philosophical studies for religious faith. He studied Jewish theology in his early years and returned to the study of the Jewish religious tradition following his retirement from Marburg in 1912. Cohen’s philosophical system is organized in accordance with the Kantian scheme of logic, ethics and aesthetics. In the three volumes of his major work, *Logic of Pure Knowledge*, *Ethics of Pure Will*, and *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling*, religion is given no independent sphere of knowledge and can be taken into account philosophically only as it fits within these categories. Logic is concerned

with the *a priori* structures of the mind which make possible any cognitive experience and in volume one, Cohen is particularly concerned with the *a priori* knowledge of physics. Volume three is concerned with developing a science of pure feeling.

It is the second volume on the ethics of pure will which is of most importance for our purposes. Ethics is concerned with the realization of the good. Persons, however, are not merely individuals. Individuals exist in communities and nations and it is the task of philosophical ethics to develop an ideal ordering of these relations. The ideal would consist of free individuals who are at the same time united in association with all other persons, a kind of social democracy. Persons are engaged in a struggle to realize the good and this can be achieved only in free relations with others. It is here that we discover the place of the idea of God. Ethics does not depend upon the reality of God for its foundation, but the idea of God is related to ethics as a rational ideal or model for the completion of the ethical task.

Philosophically speaking, God is only an ideal. To attribute personality or existence to God would be to revert to a mythological or pre-scientific way of speaking. Cohen was aware, however, of the sharp contrast that existed between his philosophical idea of God and the God of living religious faith, and in his later years he focused on this problem. His posthumous book, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, helped earn him the reputation of being one of the leading Jewish philosophers of religion since the Enlightenment. It was also influential on the thought of other Jewish thinkers including Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber whose work is discussed in the chapter on Personalism in the second part of this book. More than any other philosophical theory, Cohen believes, he has adapted the idea of God into the context of ethical teaching. The idea of God, however, serves only as a guarantor of the ideal of humanity. Ethics has the goal of permeating the actual with the ideal but, "the proper goal of ethics has to recede in face of the scientific rigor of ethics, because of which it has to maintain the separation of actuality from the ideal, and generally between idea and actuality."¹ A gap exists between the ideal and the actual and a related gap exists between ethics and religion. Religion protests this failure to deal with human actuality and thereby establishes its own worth. The God of religion is understood to participate in the suffering and injustice of humankind, to be a helper to all ranks of persons who seek to realize the ethical goal. Such a reality, however, cannot be assured within the province of knowledge. It remains beyond knowledge, beyond the limits of the philosophical system.

The revelation of God, as Cohen understands it, does not have to do with knowledge of the being of God revealed in the world. To think of revelation in this way is to tend towards pantheism. For Cohen, God is the Unique One whose being is incommensurable with any other being. God is the Unique One, the "I am who I am," in comparison with which the world is said to have

¹Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (New York: Unger, 1972), p. 21.

no being. Being in this case loses its philosophical meaning and we cannot establish any identity between the Unique One and the being of the world. God does not reveal himself in something, but only in relation to something, and the other member of that relation or correlation is human existence. In studying Moses we learn that God does not reveal his essence or being. God reveals only the effects of his being, his will, the norms of action, love and justice. God's will is revealed in the law to which human beings are summoned in obedience. It is by virtue of this revelation that human beings come to be rational creatures set apart from other animals. Revelation creates reason. Knowledge concerns the *correlation* of persons to God, the term used for all reciprocal relations. God's being is the foundation of the existence of creation, but the creation of being is not fully adequate for human beings. God is the presupposition of human being and human knowledge, and knowledge is both theoretical and practical. Knowledge is of nature and of good and evil. Reason is the condition by virtue of which God comes into correlation with human beings. Reason is also what makes it possible for the human being to come in correlation with God. The correlation of God to humans and humans to God is what distinguishes religion from ethics and what provides actuality for the ideal ethical norms.

The focus upon God's revelation of his will leads human beings not to a contemplative worship of God, but to the worship of God in their actions of love and justice. The pure love of God is different from the pure will of ethics or the feeling of aesthetic love, and it must have its basis in the social love for our fellow human beings. Religion is compatible with the ethical, but it has its own peculiar domain. Ethical love "has brought about the discovery of the fellowman through love of man for man; on the other hand, God's love, as the ethical norm, has widened pity into the universality of humanitarianism."² The love of God is not the desire for union with God as is the case in sensuous love. It is not any kind of mystical union. It is the striving for God's nearness which is realized as the only good for other persons. The religious and the ethical also differ with regard to the "I" or the person. In the context of the ethical, the I can only be an abstract individual. In the ethical realm the I is a creature of the law, bound in duty to the law. Cohen argues, for example, that when a criminal is judged guilty by a judge, it is in accordance with the relevant paragraph of the law. This does not, however, speak to the individual who addresses himself as I. It does not release the criminal from the judgment of concrete human guilt which he has to take upon himself, and which estranges him from the ethical ideal. Ethics and the law are helpless in this regard and the individual cannot absolve himself. In such cases the ethical life borders on the religious, perhaps even demands a transition to religion in order that the individual realize the ideal. The individual recognizes his own guilt and that no one can release him from it. Ethics, we might say, sees the need for redemption and in so doing points beyond itself

²Ibid., p. 161.

to the God of religion. The individual is driven in search of redemption which can only be found in the correlation of the individual and God. It is not that God relieves the individual of responsibility for moral action, but that God frees him for moral activity, frees him to strive for the ideal.

Paul Natorp (1854–1924) joined Cohen at Marburg in 1888 as a *Privatdozent* and was appointed Professor of Philosophy a few years later. Natorp came from a liberal protestant tradition, but shared much in common with Cohen. Like Cohen, he understood the moral life to be at the center of religious life and like Cohen, the good life was seen as a task to be realized only in community with others. On these grounds Natorp rejected the views of those who would relegate religion to a realm of private experience. He also rejected the view of religion that emphasized the relation of persons to supernatural or otherworldly powers. In both cases, he argued, religion is understood to call persons apart from life in community. If religion has any value, it has to be found in communal life.

According to Natorp, religious feeling is the heart of human consciousness. But unlike Schleiermacher, Natorp understands religious feeling to provide no independent realm of cognition. It has no intentional object, natural or divine. Religious feeling is understood to be the inner side of consciousness, to be a kind of animating force at the root of our seeking knowledge, goodness and aesthetic sentiment. Religion has to do with a formless and unlimited striving which has no object of its own. Its purpose is the realization of ideal humanity. Religion, for Natorp, is thoroughly humanized; it is a religion without God.

Although Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) was Cohen's most famous student, he breaks in some ways with Cohen, and may be said to have extended the interests of the Marburg School far beyond its primary focus on logic and knowledge of the sciences. Cassirer was also Jewish and held several posts in Germany before he resigned his position as Rector of Hamburg University in 1933. He emigrated to England and Sweden and eventually to the United States where he served as Professor of Philosophy at Yale University from 1941–1944. His early interests in the logical foundations of the natural sciences carried on the tradition of Marburg Neo-Kantianism. However, he extended his analysis of the organizing principles of the mind into a broader consideration of the understanding of humankind as revealed in human culture. Struck by the way in which reality in modern physics is not so much mirrored as it is transformed into a world of symbols, Cassirer explored the variety of cultural forms and concluded that humans adapt themselves to their environments through their symbolizing activity. It is this activity which sets them apart from the lower animals. "Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the *symbolic system*. This new acquisition transforms the whole of human life."³ Cassirer argues that physical reality recedes in proportion

³Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1944), pp. 42–43.

to the advancement of human activity and that we are unable to know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium. Myth, religion, language, art and science are all parts of this symbol universe. Challenging the classical definition of human beings, Cassirer concludes that we are not so much *animal rationale* as we are *animal symbolicum*.

Of all the phenomena of human culture, myth and religion are said to be the most resistant to rational analysis. From the point of view of rational and philosophical thought, religion is fraught with theoretical antinomies and ethical contradictions. But a philosophy of human culture, argues Cassirer, is concerned with questions different from those of metaphysical or theological systems. It is concerned with the interpretation of mythical and religious imagination. The real substratum of myth and religion is feeling, not thought. And by contrast with rational thought, life is felt as a whole in myth and religion. "To mythical and religious feeling nature becomes one great society, the *society of life*."⁴ This feeling of the indestructible unity of life is so strong that it defies the fact of death. Indeed, this is so much the case, says Cassirer, that the conception of human mortality was alien to mythical and primitive religious life.

There is, according to Cassirer, no radical difference between mythical and religious thought and we cannot find a particular point in the development of human culture where myth ends and religion begins. From its beginning, myth is potential religion. In the higher religions, however, personal characteristics are discovered in the holy or the sacred. And in the great monotheistic religions it is the moral aspect of the divine that is at the center of life. Primitive religion is here overcome by a new force and the bond between humans and nature is seen in a new light. Nature is now approached from a more rational side and if nature contains a divine element, it has to do with lawfulness created and preserved by the forces of the Good. Life becomes a struggle for righteousness and persons become allies of the godhead. The good life is no longer primarily a matter of taboos but of positive freedom.

Myth, religion, language, art and science are all forms of symbolization. But are we dealing with a mere aggregate of loose and detached facts? Cassirer believes not. He learned much from data gathered by the empirical and historical sciences, but argues that philosophy must go beyond the collection of data. Philosophy seeks to understand how these facts of human culture make up an organic whole. From a metaphysical point of view it is difficult to refute the claim that we have only discontinuity in human culture. But from the point of view of critical philosophy, argues Cassirer, it is not necessary to prove the substantial unity of humankind. Unity is conceived as a functional unity and this allows for a multiplicity of constituent parts. The various parts of human culture are held together not by an identity in their natures but by their contribution to a common task. Myth, religion, language, art and science all contribute to humankind's constructing an ideal or symbolic world which

⁴Ibid., p. 110.

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