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The Psychosomatic Ethics of the Psalms: Hermann Cohen and Hajim Steinthal's "Sprachwissenschaft"

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Abstract

In this essay, the "ethics of the Psalms" is not a set of rules of conduct culled from textual interpretation. Central here is the impact of the psalms on the human being during prayer. In their use in liturgy, psalms are a mode of spoken lyrical poetry, a physical and mental event for the individual and the praying congregation. The gaze is directed toward God and the reorganization of ethical Reason desired in and by Him in the face of our all-too-human partiality. My systematic starting point is Hermann Cohen's Jewish philosophy and Hajim Steinthal's linguistics.

Keywords

Hermann Cohen – Hajim Steinthal – Holy Spirit – psalms – linguistics – psychosomatic – prayer

I

The "ethics of the Psalms" here does not imply an attempt to extrapolate diagnoses for behavior or imperatives for action from the Psalms. It is rather the doctrine of the impact of the Psalms as prayer. Psalms alter the relation of persons to themselves – and thus the manner of their action in the world. This is bound up with a presupposition. The person praying must know to a certain extent what matters in the prayer: i.e., what he or she expects or hopes to achieve by its utterance. The aim is to attain a certain form of peace. This form of peace arises from a question or longing to which the prayer provides a

response. The source of such questioning is the sufferance of sin that is bound up with our physical and mental existence as human beings. Thus, the peace desired acquires its form from knowledge about sin. Where it comprehends its own gravity, it becomes a longing and seeks expression in prayer. The ethics of the Psalms teaches the transition between longing and peace in the prayer of the Psalms. I will orient myself here to the thinking of the Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen. In the linguistic phenomenology of this speaking as prayer, he followed until the end the thinking of his early mentor Hajim Steintal.¹

In the title I designate this ethics as “psychosomatic.” The term customarily refers to a specific modern medical concept. It is used here merely to supplant the older notion of “psychophysics” that was common in Cohen’s day. Generally that term referred to a science focusing on mental phenomena, principally sensations, and their interconnection with physical and technical specifications. The present paper has a different focus, so I employ the term “psychosomatic.”

In the 1690s, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz conceptualized the relation between *psyche* and *soma* schematically in terms of three forms. In his view, body and soul or consciousness are two internally dynamic entities.² To better explain this more generally, Leibniz chose to make use, as others had before him, of the image of two synchronically running clocks: if a certain specific event occurs in one clock, then a corresponding specific event occurs in the other. Bodily movement corresponds, for example, to a concept of the will on the side of the soul, the *psyche*. The psychological perception of pain corresponds to a blow to the body. This approach extends all the way to interpreting an entire human life as a story of correspondence between body and mind – a correspondence permeating our actions and suffering. Decisive is the fact that we cannot move beyond the determination that the correspondence exists as

1 The first name “Heymann” (or other variants) mentioned in the literature was never used by Steintal himself, nor is it attested in any official documents. He signed his letters to friends “Chajim,” while in his publications he used the initial “H.” Official documents of the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin (where he taught) and the contemporary card catalog of the library of the Kaiser Wilhelm (later Humboldt) University use the name “Hajim.”

2 See Leibniz, [On prestabilized harmony, original text], in *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, vol. 4, ed. G. I. Gerhardt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1996), 500–503. For an English translation, see “*The Nature and Communication of Substances* (from: *The New System, and Explanation of the New System*),” trans. Paul Skokowski, <https://web.stanford.edu/~paulsko/leibniz.html> (accessed January 2021). See also Leibniz’s responses to Pierre Bayle’s article “Rorarius” in his philosophical dictionary and in his correspondence with Burcher de Volder.

such. We cannot interlink the two forms of motion by some kind of mechanics. How, then, can the correspondence be clarified and interpreted?

The first solution is that the two clocks share a joint mounting, a common suspension, so that a resonance between the two is generated. The shared oscillation can initiate and stabilize a synchronic functioning. Leibniz's paradigm was Christiaan Huygens's observations of mechanical clocks and pendulums. However, this explanation must be rejected when it comes to the interpretation of correspondence. It is impossible to think of body and mind as being anchored in a third interconnecting kind of entity, because in order to generate resonance, it would have to be sufficiently similar to each of the first two, and thus a kind of "wooden iron" or the like.

The second solution is to posit one of the clocks as the standard and to correct and readjust the other whenever it deviates from the first clock. Read metaphysically, this solution requires the assumption of a *deus ex machina* that repeatedly intervenes to provide assistance when necessary. Yet this approach, according to Leibniz, would be an all-too-simple variant of occasionalism and would serve to denigrate the dignity of Reason (and of God).

The third solution, preferred by Leibniz, assumes that both clocks function smoothly, free of error or deviation. There is no need for any supplementary assistance. Once created, there exists what Leibniz termed a "pre stabilized harmony." The first two solutions can also find their right and place there as well. Leibniz explained the principle of pre stabilized harmony thus: "God has made each of the two substances from the beginning in such a way that, though each follows only its own laws which it has received with its being, each agrees throughout with the other, entirely as if they were mutually influenced or as if God were always putting forth his hand."³

But critical philosophy has undermined the basis of such an optimistic psychosomatics. Nonetheless, how can we best interpret the correspondence between body and soul? In the mid-nineteenth century, Gustav Theodor Fechner proposed a solution: "Leibniz forgot one point of view – the most simple possible: They [the clocks] can keep time harmoniously [...] because they are not really two different clocks."⁴ Fechner argued that the question depends on one's point of view: "What appears to the external observer as the organic clock with its movements and its works of organic wheels and levers [...] appears to the clock itself quite differently, as its own mind with

3 Leibniz, *The Nature and Communication of Substances*.

4 Gustav Theodor Fechner, *Elements of Psychophysics*, trans. Helmut Adler (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1966), 4.

its works of feelings, drives, and thoughts.”⁵ I will leave open the question of whether Leibniz actually overlooked this fourth possible solution. For us here it has its own significance, which becomes clear if one directs the eye toward where a psychosomatic event prevails *a priori*: namely in articulated language. Here the foreground is not predominated by a mechanics guided by mathematics. Whoever might still wish to suggest a comparison with timepieces could say, echoing Fechner, that the two clocks may appear to be two, but in truth they are only one. Or more precisely: they share a common ground, which emerges into view in two coordinated harmonious configurations. Then one can observe the correspondence between body and soul within human speech, attempting in its interpretation to look at its source.

This interpretation shaped a tradition in linguistics and the philosophy of religion to which Hermann Cohen, in a substantial portion of his thought, also belonged. Important precursors were Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Hajim Steinthal. Leibniz also formulated principles that are foundational for this tradition. In Cohen’s philosophy of religion, this approach leads to an ethics of the Psalms of a special kind. He grounds the relation between man and God as a psychosomatic language event. This becomes concrete in liturgical prayer.

II

Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) obtained the fundamentals of a general Western as well as a Jewish education in significant measure from his father, a teacher in the Jewish school and *chazzan* (prayer leader) in the Jewish congregation. Cohen grew up in the synagogal world of prayer. It exerted a powerful influence on him. In the 1860s Cohen established contact with the linguist Hajim Steinthal and with Moritz Lazarus. In his later years he published three parts of a system of philosophy: *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (1902; 2nd ed., 1914), *Ethik des reinen Willens* (1904; 2nd ed., 1907), and *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (1912).

Decisive for us here is the *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (*Aesthetics of Pure Feeling*). During the preliminary studies for this part of his philosophical system, Cohen began work on a new interpretation of language in religious service and prayer. Only then did he actually bring together his system of philosophy with his thinking on religion. Of key importance are the essays “Religiöse Postulate” (2nd version, 1909), “Über den ästhetischen Wert unserer religiösen

⁵ Ibid.

Bildung" (probably 1911–1912), and "Die Lyrik der Psalmen" (1914).⁶ He took a further step in the book *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie* (1915). But the final summation is his *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, published posthumously in 1919 and subsequently reedited in 1929.

Cohen's high esteem for psychosomatic reasoning is reflected in an observation he made in 1911. He noted that "up to the present, the main emphasis of all philosophical interests [!]" has been "in the questions of consciousness in relation to biological matter."⁷ If we look at the existing parts of his *System der Philosophie* from the vantage of this trenchant statement, then his *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* appears as the theoretical preparation for knowledge pertaining to this relation. The *Ethik des reinen Willens* subsequently discusses practical norms for conscious, sentient human beings in their bodily existence acting under the demands of *Sollen*, obligation, what should be done. But it is only in the *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* that he explores the relation between consciousness and biological matter as the source of concrete individuals. Only here does the relation between mind and body come to supplant the relational nexus between consciousness and biological matter. Central here on the one hand is the internalization of bodily relations, and on the other the external description of the interior person. But if one looks for the personal proven value of this relation, manifest in its vital function to shape and sustain human life, then one arrives at questions of religion. This extends beyond the boundaries of philosophy, because the locus of this questioning and the provision of answers thereto is the religious service.

Let us try to render the systematic siting of the *Aesthetics* more precisely. Cohen places great emphasis on its "preconditions" (ÄrG I, 79–82).⁸ What is meant here are logic and ethics. Philosophy does not commence with aesthetic questions. Paramount instead is reflection, thought: "We begin with thinking" (LrE, 13).⁹ For that reason, philosophy likewise does not begin with ethics, although it has been since Socrates the unity-creating "central hub of philosophy" (ErW, 1).¹⁰ Thinking as actor and simultaneously as object creates

6 Hermann Cohen, "Religiöse Postulate," in *Werke*, ed. Helmut Holzhey et al. (Hildesheim et al.: Olms, 1977–), 15:133–160; "Über den ästhetischen Wert unserer religiösen Bildung," *Werke* 16:199–235 (there still incorrectly dated); "Die Lyrik der Psalmen," *Werke* 16:163–198. Cf. Hartwig Wiedebach, "Aesthetics in Religion: Remarks on Hermann Cohen's Theory of Jewish Existence," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 11, No. 1 (2002): 63–73.

7 Cohen, "Über die Bedeutung einer philosophischen Jugendschrift Ludwig Philippsons," *Werke* 15:599.

8 ÄrG I–II = Cohen, *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*, 2 vols. (1912), *Werke* 8/9.

9 LrE = Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, 2nd ed. (1914), *Werke* 6.

10 ErW = Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, 2nd ed. (1907), *Werke* 7.

logic. It gains determinacy through a special discipline in forming judgments about things. To that end, Cohen wishes to grasp that inquiry in terms of its principles; it aims specifically to find a grounded knowledge, self-justifying, about existing objects. That for him is a mathematical natural science. Its generator – thinking as pure knowledge – has nothing to do with a sentient, experiencing “ego” engaged in postulating something or other. Nor does it involve a personal, willing “self.”

It is ethics that deals with the latter. This involves human beings in their obligations, desires, and actions (*Sollen, Wollen und Handeln*). Here too no “ego” crystallizes, and only secondarily is there need for an empirical psychology or physiology. For that reason, ethics likewise does not derive its principles from the affectivity of the human being, although emotions are important. Cohen’s ethics provides a foundation for state relations of law and justice. They shape, alongside the beingness (*Sein*) of Nature, a “beingness of obligation” (*Sein des Sollens*, ErW, 13). The human being arrives at an ethical self-consciousness by critical participation in a social constitutional state.

What has previously received insufficient attention in Cohen’s systematics is feeling. The *Aesthetics* is dedicated to that. Cohen looks for feeling that is self-assured, shaped and made manifest in refined figures, a feeling functioning to guarantee stability, durability. He finds this in art. Body and soul now enter the field of analytical vision. His *Ästhetik* speaks of the “nature of the human being” (ÄrG I, 191). It is a nature that encompasses the human being in both “preconditions”: in both *Sollen* and *Wollen* (what ought to be done and what is wanted) – in other words, ethically, in juridical terms of law, and also as a natural living organism, that is, in terms of the logic of knowledge. In respect to the latter, art grounds itself on a knowledge that is anatomical, indeed generally biological, extending all the way to typologies of descent. It also includes the “environment” (214–215), such as in landscape painting: a human being need not be imaged and nonetheless his allegory is painted. The observer feels he is in the landscape itself. In art the “ego becomes a real event” (199).

But feeling remains a semblance. Although pure, it does not reveal any beingness in the sense of *Sein*. It has no continuance beyond the event itself. It would be contradictory to accord it the validity of beingness. That is because the preconditions here differ in terms of their temporal logic. The human being is charged with an ethical task that binds him or her to the future: an ideal of realization (*Verwirklichung*) of what is moral (ErW, 408–411). The other temporal dimensions must yield to this: “What is crucial is the emancipation of the past and present” (281). Consequently, “moral concepts” are likewise not a “fact of reality” (393). If, nonetheless, people were to insist upon reality, one would see “only natural creatures in human beings and in the peoples of history” (426).

The logic of knowledge differs. Already on the path to his basic principles of pure Understanding, Kant paid attention to the “requirement and degree of reality [*Wirklichkeit*]” (ErW, 392–393). Cohen does so similarly (LrE, 454–501). To be sure, the future continues to play its fundamental role in his *Logik*. But now reality (*Wirklichkeit*) as something *present* is not contested. It is indeed the future itself that brings what is current into existence and appearance. Pure thinking is anticipation: the prospect of another, expanded reality of knowledge, analogous to the process of counting. Precisely the prospect of the future concretizes in reverse the reality of the present.¹¹

The time-logical shift between logic and ethics in relation to reality prevents us from attempting to interpret the pure structure of feeling as a mode of beingness. The human being is on the one hand a biological organism, and on the other hand a person with obligations and wants. His sensation of time is asynchronous. He hovers strung between natural *reality* and ethical *realization*. Objectivity in this connection lapses; there are no binding laws in art. But what becomes of the human being when he departs from the art gallery or concert hall? The person remains, left over, after the aesthetic mood fades away, a residuum of mere asynchronicity. It is precisely the recently experienced emotional sense of happiness that leads their ego on into crisis. Man suffers.

However, likewise in the negation of the feeling of happiness, its preconditions remain valid. Of signal importance for Cohen is the ethical component, because its juridical form causes the human being to attribute his asynchronicity to himself. He himself is its source. The crisis that comes to supplant the aesthetic feeling of happiness flows on into the question of guilt. Here it is not about individual offenses such as theft, lies, and so on. It is guilt arising from indelible asynchronicity in bodily and mental existence. Art deals with this through the genre of tragedy: a person becomes guilty qua human being. Man cannot avoid this and pays with his death.

III

Is there an encounter with guilt that is not paid for by death – an encounter that a person first experiences, and second survives? This leads on to religion, because it requires a new mode of speaking and taking action. Historical experience comes inexorably to the fore, and a human being can only tell stories about it. Historical narration and taking action constitute witnessing. Whoever does this against the backdrop of a monotheistic faith testifies to an inherited

11 On anticipation, see LrE, 144–174: “Das Urteil der Mehrheit.”

knowledge about God. And a person who also manages to persevere in doing this when things turn serious professes a commitment, a confession. All of this, taken together, transforms guilt into sin. Because now the tragic crisis and guilt are countered by one's own defiance. It is the daring-do of continuing to speak, even though the death penalty seems willed – without masking the hopelessness, yet nevertheless trusting that one will be lifted out of that bleak situation, redeemed from it. Consequently, the concept changes. What guilt cannot be is now sin: namely, to experience and *survive* the *conditio humana*. Sin harbors the hope that the philosophical system has left open as a sharply designated empty space. Cohen takes that step: he avows and thus confesses his monotheistic experience and speaks as a Jew.

Judaism is for Cohen a “nationality” (RoR, 363–366).¹² This is the counter-concept to a nation-state. Although there can be nationalities within a state, they do not define it. Behind this idea of nationality stands a specific conception of history. The ancient Jewish national people, prepared by the experience of the Babylonian exile, became in 70 CE a stateless nationality following its political obliteration and the destruction of the Temple; instead, it became a congregation, a *Gemeinde*: “The congregation took the place of the state” (386).¹³ And with that transition, the religious service morphed as well. The Jews were faced with the question of survival and the need to find a new center. Already back in Babylon, the sacrifice-oriented religious service bound to Jerusalem had lapsed into desuetude, but now the same thing had occurred even in Palestine itself. Could the requisite center be defined in purely spiritual terms? There was already a verbal religious service that held out such a possibility.

For the question of sin this meant, Can the verbal religious service grant remission of sins or atonement (*kippur*), similar to a court of law, as did the ritual of sacrifice previously enacted between the priest and the people? The sacrifice had to be transformed from a geographically exclusively bound *manual* action into the *verbal* event of a liturgy valid and effectual everywhere. This transformation after 70 CE was one of the achievements of the talmudic era in a narrower sense. Naturally, numerous prayer formulae remained virtually unchanged. What principally altered was what we, following along the

12 RoR = Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Ungar, 1972).

13 On the spiritual significance of exile, see Cohen, “Die Messiasidee” (ca. 1892), in *Jüdische Schriften*, vols. I–III (Berlin: Schwetschke u. Sohn, 1924), II, 129–130, and the Wellhausen excerpts in Cohen, *Reflexionen und Notizen, Werke*, Suppl. 1, 145–149, fols. 148–149. Cf. Wiedebach, *The National Element in Hermann Cohen's Philosophy and Religion*, trans. William Templer (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pt. 5, “Nationality as Community,” 167–236.

lines of Hajim Steinthal, may refer to as the “interior linguistic form” (*innere Sprachform*). It involves in a particular way the physical or physiological aspect of prayer. As stated, it is a question of the locus. The only place that we always carry with us, all our movement and mobility notwithstanding, is the body, and along with it our interiority. So the center had to be shifted to that locus as its emplacement. Both the Temple sacrifice in Jerusalem and synagogical prayer are physical events. Now, however, what transpires is internalized. Cohen as a child had entered into this linguistic body-and-soul religious service. As the son of a congregational cantor he lived, so to speak, at the very fount.

Put briefly, the result is the following: through the liturgy of the Hebrew community, the human being is confirmed as a living unity in present reality, albeit he is caught up in asynchronicity. By the repetition and rhythmicity of communal prayer, this essential dialectics in our *conditio humana* is made lasting. The covenant of the people with God is not a contract but rather a promise of loyalty. Loyalty creates continuity.¹⁴ Atonement is a continual process of the recreation of unity; it becomes the human being’s second nature. Finally, the underlying dynamic and frightening motility loses its alarming character: the poles of sin and atonement disappear from view. There is a shift to the quiet of peace and tranquility, which the last chapter in Cohen’s *Religion of Reason* deals with. This peace is not scientifically or philosophically justified: “Reason does not exhaust itself in science and philosophy” (RoR, 7). What prevails is a form of Reason “peculiar in nature.”¹⁵ It becomes evident in the religious service and finds its interpretation in the linguistic thought within religious theory. Cohen found the basis of his linguistic thought in the thinking of Hajim Steinthal, his mentor since about 1864–1865, toward the end of his study time in Berlin.

The most important concept for us in this connection is “apperception,” borrowed by Steinthal from Johann Friedrich Herbart and modified. Steinthal calls it an “intuition of the intuition” (*Anschaung der Anschauung*).¹⁶ Accordingly, speaking is a reflex. Steinthal conceives of us as sentient beings with views

14 See Cohen, “Gottvertrauen” (1916), *Werke* 17:345–352; RoR, 441–445, ch. “Faithfulness.”

15 The concept of religious “peculiarity” (*Eigenart*) appears, still unspecific, in Cohen, “Der Stil der Propheten” (1901), in *Jüdische Schriften* 11, 265; it is developed terminologically in idem, *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie* (1915), *Werke* 10, passim, esp. 9–10 and 124; see idem, *Reflexionen und Notizen*, 71, fol. 72.

16 See H. Steinthal, *Grammatik, Logik und Psychologie, ihre Prinzipien und ihr Verhältnis zueinander* (Berlin: Dümmler [Harrwitz und Gossmann], 1855), esp. 295–313; cf. H. Wiedebach and Annette Winkelmann, *Chajim H. Steinthal: Nineteenth-Century Linguist and Philosopher* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 100–104. Most recently, cf. Scott Edgar, “Völkerpsychologie and the Origins of Cohen’s Antipsychologism,” *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 10, No. 1 (2020): 254–273.

about things both external to and also within ourselves, physically and mentally. If a view emerges strikingly, it triggers a reflex: we articulate some sound. When the view is repeated, sound and view become associated. Ultimately, the reverse also occurs: the uttering or hearing of the sound awakens the original view. Conditioning produces the first trace of memory.

In a second step, we confront this conditioning as a whole. We assume some distance and observe the reflex for its part strung between view and sound: an “intuition of the intuition.” And this view, reflected upon, prompts us to articulate a reflex sound. The individual instances are bundled together into an acoustic sign – an image that paints the sound, what in linguistics is called onomatopoeia. In Steinthal’s perspective, it is the primordial archetypal phenomenon of language. These sound images also take on a form of remembrance through repetition and conditioning. But this time, what happens is more than mere storage in the mind’s ear. The “intuition of the intuition” generates a consciousness of what is *one’s own*, what is interior. With this, the path of the expansion and deepening of linguistic expression commences. The *reflex* becomes *reflection*, remembrance becomes memory.

In one illustrative example, Steinthal describes a girl eighteen months old.¹⁷ He is holding her in his arms as they look down through the window at the bank of a river, where men are rolling barrels. The window is shut. The rolling barrels cannot be heard, yet the small girl articulates a sound, like “lululu.” The following day, watching the same scene, her sound becomes “bulululu.” Two weeks later, some wooden poles fall down inside the house; the girl is frightened and subsequently says, “bulululu.” When she sees rolling coins, she says “dullrullul.” The girl already knows the word “ball” but does not use it yet to refer to small spherical objects; rather she applies it only to medical pills. But with the child’s increasing linguistic ability, “bulululu” and “ball” come closer together, and the meaning of the word “roll” is revealed to her. Her onomatopoeic sound-painting encounters the cultural-historical legacy of everyday language. General shared motifs from the linguistic community are associated with the sounds the child makes and form the conception of a thing with specific features. In this way, the “self-active development of thinking” has its beginning. The phonological sound “ball” is now a word, a lexeme. It refers to what perfectly rolls: “perfect rolling” remains its “interior linguistic form” – “the

17 See H. Steinthal, *Abriss der Sprachwissenschaft*, Teil 1, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Dümmler [Harrwitz und Gossmann], 1881), 382–383; on Cohen’s copy of the first edition (1871), which contains numerous comments and markings, see Cohen, *Werke*, Suppl. 2, *Die Hermann-Cohen-Bibliothek*, 192 (no. 758).

joint moment of feeling together with the sound of the perception.¹⁸ Our body also contributes to this process. It shapes both the perceptual act (via eyes, ears, etc.) and also the formation of the sound (through lung, larynx, mouth, etc.). The interior linguistic form “is a psycho-physical fact.”¹⁹

IV

Let us return to Cohen’s theory of feeling. Seen from this vantage point, philosophy as a whole is a linguistic event and is consequently bound up with feeling. However, depending on the topic and method, it takes various attitudes to its “thought feelings” or “feelings of will” (Cohen also speaks in this connection of “annexes”).²⁰ In his *Logik*, feeling is not a topical focus; in his *Ethik*, it appears only as an indirect subject. This means that whoever speaks and philosophizes in logic or ethics inevitably also communicates feeling, emotion. However, it is a feeling that is striving against itself: negation of feeling becomes here the feeling for language. Objectification is the aim.²¹ The conceptual words distance themselves from the feeling. Their interior linguistic form is a constant generation and purification of knowledge and will in accordance with valid laws. In logic and ethics, both the object and the philosophical foundations are science; the top priority is justification (*logon didonai*).

Things are different in the realm of Cohen’s *Ästhetik*. Its object is not science but art. The relation to annexes of feeling is reversed. In art there are, of course, things, objects, conceptual values, ways of behavior, physics and mathematics. But art does not seek their objectification; rather, it makes use of them for their associated feelings. Art looks, as Cohen sees it, within, into the interior: the shaping of feeling is “internalization” (ÄrG I, 379–387). Things, proportions, concepts, words, and so on appear in works of art – in order to express feelings in their multiplex diversity, to accord them a parable-like or allegorical form. Steinthal’s example, borrowed by Cohen in his aesthetics, is Psalm 19:6: the sun rises, “which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a

18 Steinthal, *Abriss* I, 392–393.

19 *Ibid.*, 380–381.

20 On “Denkgefühl” and “Willensgefühl,” see, e.g., ErW, 195; ÄrG I, 366. On “Annex,” cf. ErW, 195–197; ÄrG I, 143–145.

21 On the ethical speech act, cf. Pierfrancesco Fiorato, “Cohens Theorie der Sprachhandlung im Kontext,” in *Cohen im Kontext*, ed. Heinrich Assel and Hartwig Wiedebach (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 245–261, esp. 257–259.

strong man to run his course” (370).²² Objectively the glowing ball of the sun, the bridegroom, and the hero or “strong man” have nothing in common, but all three accompany the feeling of joy. For that reason they can be poetically linked without causing offense. To conceptually grasp the incomprehensible feeling then becomes the hermeneutical task: it is solved if the commentator can say with solid justification that the verse is an expression of joy.

The procedure attains its highest stage in connection with a feeling that is not associated with any object. This is true of the asynchronicity mentioned earlier: on the one hand, we experience ourselves as present real living beings, and on the other hand, as humans under the law of what ought to be done, the law of pure future and de-realization of the present. Consequently, asynchronicity does not belong to any object realm, neither logical nor ethical. But these two disciplines completely encompass all possibilities to objectify something. Thus, asynchronicity is not objectifiable, nor is guilt associated with it. They are homeless in the world of objects. At most they can be grasped as feeling, i.e., within art, with its vantage focused on the nature of the human being as a whole. But that nature is likewise not an object. Thus we arrive at the art of the tragic. Philosophical aesthetics can conceptually grasp its feeling. It leads to the question raised earlier: How are we able not only to experience what is asynchronous but also to survive it?²³ The answer is religious. It leads to the concept of sin. From there it directs us on to the event of atonement. However, atonement as a feeling is peace.

The feeling interwoven with asynchronicity is longing for harmony within our temporal dissonance. In Cohen’s view, the artistic form expressing longing is lyric poetry.²⁴ When we recite a love poem, longing speaks of the yearning for a beloved person – but, it should be noted, without “fulfillment in an embrace” (ÄrG II, 27). Only in longing does lyric poetry have internal agreement with itself and beauty. Uniting the lovers would obstruct the pure feeling. Lyrical longing is at peace within itself. It casts its gaze beyond the boundary of the feeling Self and nonetheless remains within its limits. The poem speaks with only one center, but knows two. It remains in this “dual unity” (47).

22 Cited from the Jewish Publication Society translation (1917), <https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt2619.htm> (accessed December 2020). Simon Kaplan in his translation of Cohen’s RoR uses the JPS version as well.

23 An attempt at an answer in art itself is, in Cohen’s view, *modern* tragedy, typically manifest in the drama of Shakespeare (ÄrG II, 86–93). However, the *juridical* problem of sin (vide infra) is not solvable by means of pure art.

24 See Günter Bader, *Psalterspiel: Skizze einer Theologie des Psalters* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), esp. 351–354; cf. Wiedebach, *National Element*, esp. 160–166.

This “dual unity” determines also the form of the Psalms (36). In Cohen’s conception, to feel this form in speaking them is prayer. “Prayer must be a dialogue,” Cohen states in *Religion of Reason*, but a lyrical dialogue: “This lyrical confession has to sing a monologue in the dialogue” (RoR, 372, 387).²⁵ This structure is shifted into the space of the synagogue: the congregational religious service is in its totality a lyrical event. That is why it requires composition, metrics, an agenda. Its center is the prayer of atonement: humans with a knowledge of sin stand before the Lord and long for atonement. The expectation of an action initiated and proceeding from God has to be excluded. It is solely the lyrical status of the congregation standing “before God” (RoR, 220) that creates atonement. And as the body is also active in the onomatopoeia of the individual, so too is the corporeality of the congregation now active. How is this body present?

V

“Interiorization of the natural stuff of the body” is the formula of Cohen’s aesthetics (ÄrG II, 45). Goethe’s phrase “My intestines are burning” (*Meine Eingeweide brennen*) is for Cohen one example. He senses here an influence on style stemming via Luther from Jeremiah and the Psalms.²⁶ I will leave open the question as to whether he conceives of Goethe according to the Bible or rather the Bible according to Goethe. The “burning intestines” – with a hefty portion of tolerance – can be linked with two passages in the book of Lamentations (1:20; 2:11). Certainly the Psalms themselves do not contain this precise formulation, even if for Cohen there are similar formulations, which he cites in “Die Lyrik der Psalmen.”²⁷

But even allowing some generous tolerance, “burning intestines” is still not a viable reference to a language-body, a *Sprachleib*. We have to proceed one step further, to Cohen’s assessment of the Hebrew language of prayer. It is the bridge to this kind of body. However, caution is advised. It is not sufficient that the participants in Hebrew liturgy feel themselves to be a bodily

25 Hans Martin Dober, “Die Vernunft im Gebet,” in *Religion aus den Quellen der Vernunft: Hermann Cohen und das Evangelische Christentum*, ed. H. M. Dober and Matthias Morgenstern (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2012), esp. 208–217.

26 See, e.g., ÄrG II, 36, 188; RoR, 150, 212; in Goethe, e.g., “Mignons Lied” (“Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt”), in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, book 4, ch. 11 (Weimarer Ausgabe, 1. Abt., vol. 22, 67). For Richard Wigmore’s English translation of “Mignon’s Song,” see <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/908> (accessed December 2020).

27 Cohen, “Die Lyrik der Psalmen,” *Werke* 16:185–187.

physical community. That alone would be erudite effusion. The problem of sin is tougher: it demands objectivity. Atonement must give shape to beingness, to a *Sein* over and beyond the aesthetic semblance and image. It is important to note that Cohen's monotheistic status of prayer is necessarily lyrical. Consequently, we require a linkage or feedback of emotion to an objective form of knowledge. The possibility of this feedback lies in the juridical character of atonement.

Atonement in Cohen's thinking, following the Kantian "*quid iuris?*," is self-justification. It springs neither from an inherited congenital trait nor from a divine event. Atonement is an autarchic action of the human being. How can that be, since we are, after all, threatened in synchronicity with losing the basis for certain judgments, and thus autarchy itself? Cohen here harks back to his theory of the juridical trial and of punishment in his *Ethik des reinen Willens*. The gist of it is this: To punish a criminal is neither retaliation nor deterrence. Rather it involves re-inclusion anew of the culprit, who has by her or his action come into conflict with the state polity, within its moral balance of energy.²⁸ To that end, the court first establishes the facts of the case and then imposes a penalty. The third stage is up to the individual who has been sentenced: he or she can discover their own guilt and recognize the penalty. If the individual accomplishes this, there is no longer a criminal. "With the penance of the penalty a shift in subject occurs. The subject of the criminal is shed, moral self-awareness is regained" (ErW, 378).

It is similarly the case with sin. The human being must discover that his or her non-reconciled state points back to something interior, comparable to juridical guilt. The difference, however, is that the state's verdict is grounded on solid knowledge regarding the source, motivation, and sequence of action of the deed – including the knowledge that some aspects of the action may remain unexplained. By contrast, the religious process of atonement is grounded on a misdeed whose source, motivation, and sequence of action cannot in principle be established. The Jewish doctrine of atonement does demand that before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, all misdeeds committed *knowingly*, in particular against other persons, are to be cleansed and corrected face-to-face. But it is only then that the most important aspect appears, namely "*unwitting transgression (shegaga)*" (RoR, 199). Herein lies the limit of the state justice system. Before its court one cannot seek justification if being human is itself the indictment.

28 See Wiedebach, "Physiology of the Pure Will: Concepts of Moral Energy," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 13, Nos. 1–3 (2004): 85–103, reprinted in *Hermann Cohen's "Ethics,"* ed. Robert Gibbs (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 85–103.

It thus requires another forum: the religious congregation. In it the accuser, the accused, and the judge are one and the same person, both collectively and individually. In the Hebrew *Vidui* prayer recited on the Day of Atonement, whose liturgy Cohen knew how to lead in the synagogue, the human being acknowledges having sinned. This does not occur silently or in private ego-formulations, but rather publicly with established we-formulas. But that is not the language of state juridical procedure oriented to objectified individual crimes and misdeeds. Rather, it is the language of a *monologic dialogue* in accordance with lyrical love poetry. Now lyric poetry becomes religious in a strict sense; it is a felt correlation between man and God.

The longing is directed toward God, and as in the poem, the liturgical community gives itself an answer. Immediately after the opening prayer *Kol Nidre*, there sounds for the first time the biblical “motto for the Day of Atonement” (RoR, 217): “And all the congregation of the children of Israel shall be forgiven, and the stranger that sojourneth among them; for in respect of all the people it is considered to be *shegaga* [unwitting transgression].”²⁹ The procedure is opened and closed in one and the same utterance. There is a pervasive rhythm of self-accusation and the consolation of reconciliation, speaking in spatial terms: of the distance from and nearness to God. Psalm 73:28, “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good,” was Cohen’s favorite verse (RoR, 163 et al.). Thus the public-lyrical court becomes an act of self-nearing (*hitkarbut*) by the individual, approaching closer toward God (313).³⁰ The path of atonement remains solely a pathway tread by the human being.

It is the human person who acts in speaking here. “No special *event or arrangement* in God’s essence is necessary for the forgiveness of sin. Creation and revelation are the sufficient preconditions; they both create the holy spirit of man. And this holy spirit, whose self-preservation is accomplished by self-sanctification, is entirely secured against relapse into sin through God’s goodness, whose particular task is forgiveness” (RoR, 213–214). Cohen’s answer to aporia lies in the Holy Spirit. Namely, on the one hand God “forgives” sin, but on the other hand, the human being has the power of “self-sanctification” (206–207). “Thus it becomes a pithy feature of the style of the psalms to equate the good God with the forgiving God” (209).

29 Num 15:26, ending with “... *ki le-khol ha-'am bi-shegaga*,” here rendered in English according to Cohen’s translation in “Die Versöhnungsidee” (ca. 1890–1895), *Jüdische Schriften* 1, 134. On this see Michael Zank, *The Idea of Atonement in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), esp. 107–113. On the “motto for the Day of Atonement,” see also Cohen, *Reflexionen und Notizen*, esp. 28 and 37 (fols. 26 and 37).

30 See also Cohen, “Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis” (1908), *Werke* 15:228.

VI

What, then, is the “Holy Spirit”? For Cohen it is doubtless a concept of Reason central in human existence, indeed a designation for the evident nature of Reason itself. But it can only designate it because Reason is nourished by a source that lies over and beyond human autarchy.

Against the backdrop of Kantian discipline, no one will believe that a lyrical spoken statement can as such achieve atonement. And naturally, Cohen never chose to burden a poem by Goethe or a court tragedy with this claim. Nonetheless, it does occur in liturgy. The reason why atonement occurs and is valid here lies in the Hebrew language itself. As a language of prayer, it is the “language of the sanctuary” (*leshon ha-qodesh*).³¹ Cohen considers the “hymns of praise of Israel” themselves to be a sanctuary: “The spiritualization that the psalm produces by putting the praises of Israel in the place of Zion and Jerusalem is also joined to holiness: ‘Yet Thou that art enthroned upon the praises of Israel’ [Ps 22:4]” (RoR, 98). But this holiness “comprises” both the juridical system of penal justice and also the longing of love; “it makes love akin to justice” (*ibid.*). Thus, the liturgy of the Psalms furnishes the lyrical Ego with a mode of juridical validity. Love and justice, opposite poles in the ideal of human existence and beingness (*Sein*), come together in the interior linguistic form of this lyrical Ego. Revelation – which Cohen conceived not as a one-time “gift of the Torah” but rather as a dynamically continued “action of giving” (*Gebung*)³² – is in this respect an always new ability to speak the “language of the sanctuary.”

Here, then, does the “language body” of the congregation become tangible, comprehensible. For in the verbal religious service too, the interior linguistic form is a “psycho-physical fact.”³³ Whoever enters with full knowledge and feeling into their spoken sound event and assists it in coming to pass in articulation is drawn into onomatopoeia. That person experiences a coincidence of formation of sound and communal linguistic tradition and transmission, similar to the child learning what a “ball” is. This coincidence is Cohen’s source of “nationality,” of the Jewish people, into which, as he often said, one is “born.”³⁴ To be sure, that is also descent from Jewish parentage, but above all it is a linguistic-physiological fact of personal experience.

31 Cohen, “Zionismus und Religion” (1916), *Werke* 16:219.

32 Cohen, “Einheit und Einzigkeit Gottes III. Die Offenbarung” (1918), *Werke* 17:640.

33 Steinthal, *Abriss* I, 380–381.

34 For some evidence for this, taken from a randomly chosen volume, see *Werke* 15:109, 362, 353. On the “national spirit” of the sources, see RoR, 24.

Cohen's expression for this evidence is the "Holy Spirit." It "could be discovered only in connection with the problem of sin and only in the lyrical form of the psalm" (RoR, 106).³⁵ The most important passage is Psalm 51:12–13. The psalm is introduced with the words "A Psalm of David, when Nathan the Prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba" (cf. RoR, 102).³⁶ The reference is to the events described in 2 Samuel 11–12: King David is conducting a difficult war. He is at home. From the roof of his house he sees a beautiful woman, Bathsheba. He makes her his own. David then dispatches her husband Uriah into a dangerous battle in which he is slain. Bathsheba, already pregnant by David, becomes a widow. The king marries her and considers the matter settled and closed. Then the prophet Nathan appears, and using allegory he narrates to the king a different yet similar story of injustice. David, now seized by a sense of rage, demands the death penalty for the perpetrator. In doing so he pronounces the sentence upon himself. When he realizes this, he does penance. The lyrical version of his prayer is Psalm 51.

David supplicates: "Be gracious unto me, O God, according to Thy mercy; according to the multitude of Thy compassions blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (vv. 3–4). Verses 12 and 13 lead on to atonement. Cohen translates: "Create for me a clean heart, O God; and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence; and *take not Thy Holy Spirit from me* (אל-תשליכני מלפניך ורוח קדשך אל-תקה ממני, v. 13)."³⁷ Here the Holy Spirit appears. And verse 19 articulates the guarantee of atonement, the evidence that this lyrical pronouncement contains success within: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (RoR, 213).

The interiorization of the old sacrificial divine service within the prayer-based religious service is captured in this sentence. The verses can be found in part in the *Slichot*, the prayers for forgiveness, recited particularly between the New Year and Yom Kippur. But the congregation does not speak in the first-person singular voice of the Psalm, but rather as a "we." Cohen cites this liturgical version of Psalm 51:13 in a posthumously published reflection: "אל תשליכנו מלפניך [ורוח קודשך] אל תקח ממנו" (Cast *us* not away from Thy presence; and take not [Thy Holy Spirit] from *us*).³⁸ "The people as the congregation," as the conclusion to *Religion of Reason* expresses it, "corresponds to the

35 See Wiedebach, "Der heilige Geist bei Hermann Cohen," in Dober and Morgenstern, *Religion aus den Quellen der Vernunft*, esp. 35–38.

36 Cohen, "Der heilige Geist" (1915), *Werke* 16:454. (As a rule, when Cohen does not translate scripture himself, he follows a revised Luther Bible.)

37 Cohen, "Der heilige Geist" (1915), *Werke* 16:455; see also RoR, 102–103.

38 Cohen, *Reflexionen und Notizen*, 102, fol. 126 with n. 4.

I of the psalms that are the basic form of prayer” (RoR, 387). “The Holy Spirit, given by God to humankind, shapes the indestructible character in the human being.”³⁹ This indestructible element is the peace between *psyche* and *soma*, mind and body, created in the Psalm prayer.

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39 Cohen, “Der heilige Geist” (1915), *Werke* 16:456.