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LEO STRAUSS AND HERMANN COHEN'S "ARCH-ENEMY": A QUASI-COHENIAN APOLOGY OF BARUCH SPINOZA

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In an often quoted passage, Strauss once asserted: "I am in no way a Cohenian!"¹ Notwithstanding this disclaimer, there are distinct echoes and correspondences between Strauss's work and Cohen's. Without ever becoming a "Cohenian" in a scholastic sense, Strauss nevertheless paid close attention to questions raised by Cohen and engaged with them repeatedly. In the following, I will focus on Strauss's critique of Cohen's reading of Baruch Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (henceforth: TPT). I will show that Strauss's own reading of Spinoza is shaped by questions he derived from engaging with Cohen.

¹ Letter to Dr. Gottschalk, December 28, 1931; however, the letter proceeds with the following statement: "Cohen is much too original and deep a thinker that the doubtfulness of his teaching can release us thereby from listening, in any event, to that which he says" (cited in Alan Udoff, "On Leo Strauss: An Introductory Account", *Leo Strauss's Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement*, ed. by Alan Udoff, Boulder: L. Rinner Publishers, 1991: 1-29, esp. pp. 22-23 n3).

First, I will explain why Spinoza has been described as Hermann Cohen's "arch-enemy". The paper will then focus on Strauss's criticism of Cohen's interpretation of Spinoza, as expressed in Strauss's first philosophical essay, "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science". Finally, I will track Cohen's influence on the early Strauss through "The Testament of Spinoza" (1932). I will argue that this article contains a quasi-Cohenian interpretation of Baruch Spinoza. "Cohenian", because (i) Strauss's interpretation answers questions raised by Cohen in his reading of Spinoza, and (ii) Strauss's answers are closer to Cohen's interpretive stance than one might think; "quasi", because Strauss's answers to Cohen's questions are very different from Cohen's own answers.

I.

That Baruch Spinoza "was the arch-enemy to Hermann Cohen" is a pregnant statement made by Steven Schwarzschild.² In this statement, Schwarzschild brilliantly captures a number of verdicts by Cohen concerning Spinoza. Cohen considered Spinoza a renegade to his people, an apostate full of hatred for the Jews, a "falsifier and slanderer of Judaism",³ someone guilty of "a humanly incomprehensible betrayal."⁴ Franz Nauen has remarked that Cohen found Spinoza "essentially disloyal"⁵; in Cohen's words, Spinoza lacked the ethical virtue of fidelity

² Steven Schwarzschild, "Do Noachites have to believe in Revelation? (A passage in Dispute between Maimonides, Spinoza, Mendelssohn and H. Cohen)" in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 52 (1961-1962), pp. 296-308, and 53 (1962-1963), pp. 30-65, esp. p. 38

³ Hermann Cohen, "Die religiösen Bewegungen der Gegenwart" repr. in *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften*, ed. B. Strauß, with an introduction by Franz Rosenzweig, Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924, (three volumes; henceforth: JS I-III), vol. I, 36-65, esp. 55.

⁴ JS III 361.

⁵ Franz Nauen, "Hermann Cohen's Perceptions of Spinoza: A Reappraisal", *AJSReview*, 4 (1979), pp. 111-124, esp. p. 123.

(*Treue*).⁶ I will therefore use Cohen's concept of fidelity as a key to explain his utter aversion to Spinoza.⁷

The virtue of fidelity is not only an important component of Cohen's theoretical system in general but more importantly it is also one of Cohen's most effective and forceful intellectual tools to strengthen Jewish identity and to defend Judaism against anti-Jewish attacks. As many scholars have pointed out, Cohen was deeply engaged in the fight against anti-Jewish feelings of all kinds, ranging from ancient religious prejudices to more recent racist ideologies.⁸ Parallel to his fight against anti-Jewish sentiments, Cohen was increasingly committed to Jewish education and scholarship and, in his writings, he emphasized the universal values contained in Judaism and its profound contributions to Western culture. In this context, fidelity toward one's family, friends, religious community, and nationality is used by Cohen to explain why it is morally indispensable to maintain a Jewish identity in spite of the difficulties of living in a non-Jewish society.

Cohen discusses the virtue of fidelity in two prominent places, namely in *Ethik des reinen Willens* (Ethics of Pure Will, 1904, second edition 1907), ch. 14, and in *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (Religion of Reason From the Sources of Judaism, 1919, second edition 1928), ch. 21. As an ethical virtue, Cohen describes fidelity as a persistency of the will: it is directed toward the Other, but its main goal is the unity of the Self.⁹

⁶ See Hermann Cohen, *Kants Begründung der Ethik*, 2nd edition, Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1910, p. 467.

⁷ Cohen had many theoretical reasons to dislike Spinoza and his pantheism but these reasons fail to explain the violence of Cohen's verdict on Spinoza. For a better understanding of Cohen's approach to Spinoza, see Nauen, op. cit., and cf. Ernst Simon, "Zu Hermann Cohens Spinoza-Auffassung", repr. in *Brücken. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1965, pp. 205-214, and Hans Liebeschütz, "Hermann Cohen und Spinoza", *Bulletin of the Leo Baeck Institute*, 12 (December 1960), pp. 225-238.

⁸ See Helmut Holzhey, *Cohen und Natorp*, 2 vols., Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co., 1986, vol. 1, p. 37; Sylvain Zac, *La philosophie religieuse de Hermann Cohen*, Paris: J. Vrin, 1984, p. 19.

⁹ See Hermann Cohen, *System der Philosophie. Zweiter Teil: Ethik des reinen Willens*, Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, repr. in *Werke*, vol. 7, with an English Introduction by S. S. Schwarzschild, Hildesheim: Olms, 1981, esp. pp. 569-570 (henceforth ERW). For a description of Cohen's

Fidelity is what allows human beings to go beyond the fickleness of the heart and therefore what gives steadiness (*Stetigkeit*) to a relationship, be it with a single person (friendship, love), with a community (national, religious), or with G-d. According to Cohen, not relationships themselves but their persistency, the steadiness of maintaining them, has “a crucial ethical value”,¹⁰ because it leads to perfecting what Cohen calls “ethical self-consciousness.”

Cohen uses the virtue of fidelity to explain why a person should preserve a link to her people and religious community in the face of any personal choice. In particular, in his essay “Der Religionswechsel in der neuen Ära des Antisemitismus”,¹¹ Cohen establishes a connection between fidelity to the Jewish community and the fight against anti-Semitism. Cohen condemns those who choose conversion to Christianity on grounds of social expediency, such as to avoid the growing effects of anti-Jewish attacks or simply to improve their social condition or gain a better job. Cohen agrees that being part of the Jewish community is difficult because of social prejudice and anti-Jewish feelings. Nevertheless, according to him, leaving the community to avoid persecution leads the persecutor to strengthen her prejudice and negative attitude towards the community. Therefore Cohen considers religious conversion not only a private, personal act, but also a public one, a betrayal of one’s own people, which affects the whole community. The lack of fidelity towards one’s own people is therefore a lack of faithfulness towards family and friends, which are part of the community. But, as we mentioned, the main goal of fidelity is the unity of the self, so a lack of fidelity is ultimately a lack of fidelity toward oneself, a rejection of the ethical improvement of one’s

ethical theory of virtues, see Andrea Poma, *The critical philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, transl. by John Denton, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

¹⁰ ErW 577.

¹¹ Hermann Cohen, “Der Religionswechsel in der neuen Ära des Antisemitismus”, *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, 2. Oktober 1890, pp. 489-490, repr. in JS II 342-345.

own ethical self-consciousness.¹² Fidelity guarantees that one will maintain a continuity with her own history and identity, in spite of any change and development which may occur in one's life.¹³ Thus, Cohen defines remembering as the "psychological function of faithfulness"¹⁴: in the end, lack of fidelity leads to forgetting who one is and who one should become (through one's ethical improvement).

In light of Cohen's analysis of the virtue of fidelity, it seems clear why Cohen couldn't accept Spinoza's behaviour towards the Jewish community. As a Jew, Cohen was not only deeply committed to preserving and strengthening the Jewish identity, but he also considered this duty, on a more theoretical level, as a fundamental part of the improvement of his ethical self-consciousness. As a part of his duty, Cohen included the task of purifying the Jewish religion from its mythological elements, showing that the Jewish religion is a *Religion of Reason*, a religion whose inner core is morality and whose inner task is the moral progress of humanity towards the messianic ideal of a unified humanity. Cohen considered Spinoza as an enemy not only to the Jewish people but also to the project of ethical idealism: instead of developing the universalistic elements contained in the Jewish tradition, Spinoza discredited it as a political legislation, thus offering arguments to defamers and detractors of the Jewish belief. Spinoza especially lacked fidelity because he knew Judaism from the inside, had a good Jewish education, and nevertheless-Cohen maintains-gave a false and misleading

¹² See ErW 583: "Without fidelity, ethical self-consciousness remains a goal that the ethical work-in-progress will never achieve". See also Hartwig Wiedebach, *Die Bedeutung der Nationalität für Hermann Cohen*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1997, esp. p. 44.

¹³ See ErW 572.

¹⁴ Cohen, Hermann, *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, nach dem Manuskript des Verfassers neu durchgearbeitet und mit einem Nachwort versehen von Bruno Strauß, Frankfurt am Main: Kauffmann (henceforth RV), 1929; trans. S. Kaplan with an Introduction by L. Strauss, *Religion of Reason out of the sources of Judaism*, New York: Frederick Ungar (henceforth RoR), 1972; RV 509, RoR 441. Here, incidentally, *Treue* is translated as "faithfulness." I prefer to use "fidelity" as the best equivalent to the German *Treue*.

image of the Jewish tradition. According to Cohen, Spinoza did all of this intentionally: his lack of fidelity was deliberate.¹⁵ Spinoza's attitude towards Judaism had, in Cohen's opinion, fatal consequences not only because it lent credence to anti-Jewish arguments, but most of all because it led many thinkers, including Kant, to a complete misunderstanding of the Jewish religion. Instead of fighting anti-Jewish prejudices, Spinoza contributed to them: "The key statements in which Spinoza discharged his vindictive hatred of the Jews can still be found today almost literally in the daily newspapers of certain political tendencies".¹⁶ For this reason it seems quite clear why Cohen's critique of Spinoza manifested itself as "a holy war against an enemy to whom no quarter can be given, a battle not only between truth and falsehood but between good and evil".¹⁷

II.

Leo Strauss began his philosophical career with a critical essay on Hermann Cohen's interpretation of Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise ("Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science").¹⁸ The article appeared in the May/June 1924 issue of the Jewish periodical *Der Jude*, edited by Martin Buber, and attracted the attention of Julius Guttmann, the director of the Academy for the Science of Judaism (*Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*). On Guttmann's initiative, the Academy offered Strauss a research fellowship, which he accepted, and he was

¹⁵ This can be seen, in Cohen's opinion, especially by looking at Spinoza's explanation of the *ben noah*: see RV 379-388. A discussion of Cohen's objections to Spinoza on this topic can be found in Schwarzschild, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ JS III 363.

¹⁷ Nauen, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

¹⁸ Leo Strauss, "Cohens Analyse der Bibelwissenschaft Spinozas", *Der Jude*, vol. VIII (1924), pp. 295-314, repr. in Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Heinrich Meier, Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler (henceforth: GS 1-3), vol. 1, 1997, pp. 363-386; Engl. in Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings (1921-1932)*, translated and edited by Michael Zank, Albany (N.Y.): State University of New York Press, 2002, pp. 140-172.

subsequently employed by the Academy to finish his monograph on Spinoza¹⁹ and to work on the Mendelssohn Jubiläumsausgabe.²⁰

A study of Strauss's early writings on Spinoza *vis a vis* Strauss's relationship with Cohen is interesting in light of his lifelong engagement with Cohen. Strauss honoured Cohen by writing an introduction to the English edition of Cohen's *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. If we consider that the same article was also published at the end of Strauss's last work, the posthumously published *Studies in Platonic Philosophy*, it represents in some sense a kind of conclusion to Strauss's own work. As remarked by many scholars, Cohen remained for Strauss a permanent and stimulating point of reference from the very beginning to the very end of his philosophical activity.²¹ Strauss greatly honored the memory of Cohen but he also displayed complete intellectual independence in criticizing Cohen's views. The analysis of Strauss's early writings on Spinoza, especially of "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science" and of "The Testament of Spinoza", will show that Strauss took seriously the questions raised by Cohen in his critique of Spinoza and that he gave answers to these questions that, while not strictly speaking Cohenian, seem inspired by Cohen's way of thinking and that may therefore constitute a Cohenian legacy.

Strauss explained his reasons for engaging with Hermann Cohen's interpretation of Spinoza in his *Preface* to the English edition (1965) of his

¹⁹ *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*, Berlin: Akademieverlag, 1930.

²⁰ Cf. Michael Zank, "Introduction" in Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings (1921-1932)*, pp. 10-11.

²¹ See Alexander Altmann, "Leo Strauss: 1899-1973", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, XLI-XLII (1973-1974), xxxiii-xxxvi, esp. p. xxxvi; Alan Udoff, "On Leo Strauss: An Introductory Account", loc. cit.; Kenneth Hart Green, "Leo Strauss as a Modern Jewish Thinker", in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of the Modernity*, ed. by Kenneth Hart Green, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997, pp. 1-84, esp. pp. 17-25; Michael Zank, "Introduction" in Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings (1921-1932)*, esp. p. 40 n33; Leora Batnitzky, "Hermann Cohen and Leo Strauss", in *Hermann Cohen's Ethics*, ed. by David Novak and Robert Gibbs, forthcoming, which analyzes Strauss's philosophical relation to Cohen from a methodological point of view. (I wish to thank Leora Batnitzky who was so kind as to provide me with an advance copy of her hitherto unpublished essay.)

monograph on *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. However, a connection between Cohen's legacy and Strauss's research project on Spinoza's Bible Science was openly drawn by Strauss many years before this well-known Preface. Already in 1926, Strauss wrote as follows: "I owe the idea for my work to the critical study of Hermann Cohen's article, 'Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum' which, in terms of the radicalism of its questioning and the forcefulness with which he calls Spinoza to account, is simply paradigmatic and which, in this very respect, is peerless in the recent literature on Spinoza".²² Similarly, Franz Rosenzweig remarked that Strauss was the only one in his generation who gave an appropriate response to Cohen's criticism of Spinoza: "Cohen took Spinoza seriously. For this reason, his Spinoza has not been taken seriously. Except for Leo Strauss's short and important essay 'On the Bible Science of Spinoza and His Precursors', I am not aware of any other work that grappled seriously with Cohen's problem".²³ Nevertheless, Strauss pointed out from the very beginning of his investigation that he couldn't but find a discrepancy between Cohen's own philosophical project, which he saw as inscribed in the tradition of the Enlightenment, and Cohen's opposition to Spinoza: "To be sure, while few of Cohen's contemporaries were as inspired as he was by the spirit of the great age of the Enlightenment, to which he zealously testified in many important passages of his writings, when it comes to his criticism of Spinoza, apparently diverted by his insight into the deeper opposition, he failed to recognize Spinoza's true objective (which is essentially identical with that of the Enlightenment) as well as the immediate target of his attack. Spinoza did not turn against the 'monotheism of Judaism' or against the

²² Leo Strauss, "Zur Bibelwissenschaft Spinozas und seiner Vorläufer", *Korrespondenzblatt des Vereins zur Gründung und Erhaltung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 7 (1926), pp. 1-22; repr. in GS 1, pp. 389-414; Engl. in *The Early Writings* (1921-1932), pp. 173-200, esp. p. 173.

²³ Franz Rosenzweig, "Einleitung" in Hermann Cohen, "Ein Ungedruckter Vortrag Hermann Cohens über Spinozas Verhältnis zum Judentum", in *Festgabe zum Zehnjährigen Bestehen der Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. 1919-1929, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1929, pp. 42-44, p. 43.

'social ethics of the prophets' but rather against revealed religion in all its forms. In view of Cohen's radicalization of the question, one must again undertake an analysis of the *Theological-Political Treatise (TPT)* as a radical critique of revealed religion".²⁴ The analysis of the *TPT* as a radical critique of revealed religion was undertaken by Strauss in his first book *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, but the first steps of this investigation are already clearly expressed in his earlier essay, "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science". Using a historical-critical approach, Strauss wanted to show that many (if not all) of Cohen's criticisms were due to a mistaken perspective, and therefore unmotivated.

III.

In "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science" Strauss argues that Cohen's objections to Spinoza are unjustified: considering the historical and intellectual context in which Spinoza lived and wrote, what Cohen judged to be incomprehensible was perfectly comprehensible. For example, some elements criticized by Cohen, such as the connection between political theory and critique of the Bible, the interpretation of the Bible based on political considerations, and the identification of religion and Scriptures belonged with 17th century philosophical culture in general, and not with Spinoza alone. As Strauss remarks, "Spinoza was compelled to engage in the critique of the Bible by legitimate motives, whether or not he was full of hatred toward Judaism"²⁵, because this attitude was a part of the struggle – which Spinoza shared with the intellectuals of his century – for the liberation of politics and science from the oppressive influence of ecclesiastical institutions. As for Cohen's philosophically more complex objection that Spinoza's *Ethics* and the *TPT* contained contradictory philosophical assumptions, Strauss answers that

²⁴ Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings* (1921-1932), p. 173. For the original, see "Zur Bibelwissenschaft Spinozas und seiner Vorläufer", loc. cit., p. 183.

²⁵ Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings* (1921-1932), p. 147 (in the original the entire sentence is emphasized as the general conclusion to section I of the essay).

“the moral principle of the *Treatise* does not contradict that of the *Ethics*. Spinoza’s general way of proceeding in the *Treatise* can be justified also from a systematic perspective, because the fundamental necessity and the objective legitimacy of the *argumentatio ad hominem* follows from the principle of hierarchy that is fundamental to the *Ethics* “.²⁶

In any case, the most problematic element of Cohen’s interpretation of Spinoza concerned, as we mentioned, Spinoza’s attitude towards Judaism. Cohen maintained that the main purpose of Spinoza’s critique of the Bible was to launch an attack on the Jewish religion and – even worse in Cohen’s perspective – to show a greater reverence towards Christianity than towards Judaism. In this respect, Strauss remarks that “the essential conclusions of Spinoza’s Bible science are sufficiently motivated by the actual nature [*Beschaffenheit*] of the object of this science”²⁷, without any need to refer to Spinoza’s Jewish connection, as Cohen does. It should not be surprising, according to Strauss, that Spinoza pointed out the political, nationalistic, particularistic, cultish and naïve-egotistical elements of the Old Testament, instead of what Cohen considered the most important elements for a fair evaluation of Judaism, namely the moral, rational, humanistic and universalistic aspects of the Jewish tradition. Strauss observes that Spinoza’s critique of the Bible need not reflect Spinoza’s attitude towards Judaism, because both the purpose and the result of the investigations in the *TPT* can be explained and understood without referring to Spinoza’s own connection to the Jewish world. The *TPT*, writes Strauss, “is a Christian-European, not a Jewish, event”²⁸, so its purpose and method should be analyzed in the context of the antithesis between the traditional-ecclesiastical and the critical-scholarly interpretations of the Bible. What Cohen forgot, according to Strauss, is that in the 17th century the striving against ecclesiastical claims on science

²⁶ Ibid., p. 152 (in the original, the entire sentence is emphasized as the general conclusion to section II of the essay).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 157 (in the original, the entire sentence is emphasized as the general conclusion to section III of the essay).

²⁸ Ibid., p. 158.

and the state was not yet resolved as it was in Cohen's time. As Strauss maintains, it would be impossible to understand and evaluate Spinoza's *TPT* without considering this fundamental struggle of European culture in the 17th and 18th century.

Strauss thus concludes his essay without discussing the question of Spinoza's attitude towards Judaism and the Jews. Nevertheless, he underlines that a further investigation was needed to clarify whether some (and, if so, which) Jewish impulses might still be alive in Spinoza's Bible science and how the interests of Judaism relate to Spinoza's Biblical scholarship. In this respect, Strauss points out the importance of Cohen's legacy for a further study of Spinoza's work: "Cohen is right when he establishes the interest of Judaism as the highest authority for assessing this science (viz., Spinoza's Bible Science). He is right when he seeks to measure Spinoza's thought about Judaism, and his conduct towards Judaism, by Jewish standards"²⁹. According to Strauss he is wrong, however, "when he determines the interest of Judaism by the external consideration of the purposes of theologico-political apologetics, rather than determining it on the basis of the inner need of the spirit of our people [*Volksgeist*]"³⁰. In any case, Strauss acknowledges "the exemplary seriousness of Hermann Cohen"³¹, attested by the fact that his questioning was free from the romantic image of the "God-intoxicated man" (Novalis) that had become pervasive in German as well as in Jewish culture. In this respect, although not explicitly, Strauss displays a "Cohenian" perspective: he adopts Cohen's non- or anti-romantic stance toward Spinoza and his writings, and he focuses on the philosophical and political presuppositions of the *Treatise*.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 161.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

IV.

Strauss subsequently proceeded to answer Cohen's question of how the interests of Judaism are affected by Spinoza's Bible science. Two years after the publication of Spinoza's *Critique of Religion*, where he had developed his thesis of the "Christian-European" character of the TPT in greater detail, Strauss wrote a short essay entitled "The Testament of Spinoza"³², which I consider a quasi-Cohenian afterword to his book on Spinoza. "The Testament of Spinoza" focuses on Spinoza's attitude towards Judaism and provides an answer to Cohen's question about the relationship between the interests of Judaism and Spinoza's Biblical studies: it constitutes the further investigation whose task Strauss articulated at the conclusion of "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science". Published in *Bayerische Israelitische Gemeindezeitung*, a Jewish periodical, "The Testament of Spinoza" is written for a Jewish public in the context of a Jewish culture, underscoring the importance of a "Jewish point of view" toward Spinoza. Furthermore, the essay begins and ends with a reference to Hermann Cohen: Cohen's question of whether Spinoza was responsible for a "humanly incomprehensible betrayal" frames Strauss's essay. Finally, although Strauss disagrees with Cohen on how this question should be answered, he nevertheless points to the relevance of Cohen's legacy for his own philosophical reasoning.

According to Strauss, Spinoza's philosophical work should not be considered as the result of his Jewish heritage. Although Spinoza was born and grew up within Amsterdam's Sephardic community, and although Spinoza's philosophical education began by reading the writings of medieval Jewish philosophers, Strauss maintains that he belongs to the European-Mediterranean tradition as a whole rather than to a parochially Jewish one:

"Good European" that he is, Spinoza takes from the Jewish tradition the common property of European ideas that it conveyed to him-and nothing

³² Leo Strauss, "The Testament of Spinoza", *Bayerische Israelitische Gemeindezeitung*. München, vol. 8 n. 21 (November 1st, 1932), p. 322, 324-326, repr. in GS 1, pp. 415-422; Engl. in *The Early Writings* (1921- 1932), pp. 216-223.

else. Thus we believe we have answered the question of whether the Jew as a Jew is entitled to venerate Spinoza. Spinoza belongs not to Judaism, but to the small band of superior minds whom Nietzsche called the "good Europeans." To this community belong *all* the philosophers of the seventeenth century, but Spinoza belongs to it in a special way. Spinoza did not remain a Jew, while Descartes, Hobbes, and Leibniz remained Christians. Thus it is not in accordance with Spinoza's wishes that he be inducted into the pantheon of the Jewish nation.³³

Thus, according to Strauss, Jews should relinquish their claim on Spinoza, noticing that this wouldn't mean surrendering him to the enemies of the Jewish nation, but rather "leave him to that distant and strange community of 'neutrals' whom one can call, with considerable justice, the community of the 'good Europeans'"³⁴. Strauss argues that one may or may not venerate Spinoza; nonetheless, one should respect his last will, "and his last will was neutrality toward the Jewish nation, based on his break with Judaism"³⁵.

The statement about Spinoza's neutrality toward Judaism is the result of Strauss's historical-critical analysis of the *TPT*, which he began with "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science" and completed in his book on *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. In the latter work, Strauss highlighted the distance between Spinoza and his original community as a peculiar and essential component of his philosophical work.³⁶ In this respect, Strauss argues that Cohen was wrong to maintain that Spinoza had a vengeful

³³ *The Early Writings* (1921-1932), pp. 219-20 (emphases in the original).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ See Leo Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft. Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischem Traktat*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1930, repr. in GS 1, pp. 1-361, esp. p. 214; Engl. transl. by E. M. Sinclair, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, New York: Schocken, 1965. It seems to me worth of notice that Cohen also remarked about Spinoza's process of estrangement [*Entfremdung*] from Judaism (see JS III 360). Here we may notice an important difference between Cohen's and Strauss's understanding of Spinoza's relation to Jewish identity: Cohen considered Spinoza as continuously related to the Jewish world, whereas Strauss considered it possible and legitimate to acknowledge Spinoza's claim of neutrality toward Judaism as a result of his distance from Judaism.

attitude towards Judaism because of the ban of the Amsterdam community, but at the same time Cohen was right that Spinoza had no legitimate place within the Amsterdam community, and therefore the Amsterdam community was justified in sanctioning Spinoza's distance through a public ban. As to Spinoza's neutrality, Strauss infers it from Spinoza's well known statement in the third chapter of the *TPT* that "(i)f the foundations of the Jewish religion have not rendered the minds of the Jews effeminate (*weibisch*), then I would absolutely believe that someday, given the opportunity and human affairs being so changeable, they (the Jews) will once again establish their empire and God will elect them anew".³⁷ This is, according to Strauss, Spinoza's "political testament" and a "neutral consideration of the possibility condition [*Möglichkeitsbedingung*] for the restoration of the Jewish state".³⁸ In other words, with this statement Spinoza did not express any wish or desire for a possible restoration of the Jewish state, but merely discussed the condition of its possibility. Spinoza's attitude is thus judged by Strauss as a sort of condescension "from the height of his philosophical neutrality",³⁹ which leaves to the Jews the decision whether or not to liberate themselves from their religion to reestablish a Jewish state. Furthermore, "he voiced this view not as a Jew, but as a neutral; and he did not even voice it, but rather just tossed it off".⁴⁰

In his conclusion, Strauss asks whether Spinoza's testament is about the liberation of the Law from the "*spirit* that makes the political restoration impossible",⁴¹ i.e., from the foundations of the Jewish religion, advocating a transformation of the Law into "a means of national preservation" or "a form of national life"⁴². His answer takes Cohen's judgment into account:

³⁷ Cited in "The Testament of Spinoza", loc. cit., p. 220.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 221.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 222.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 221.

⁴² Ibid.

Not in this way, not with veiled words and a weary heart, should we bid farewell to Spinoza—if, in fact, we *must* bid farewell to him as someone on whose conscience is a “humanly incomprehensible betrayal” (Cohen) of our nation. For a moment at least, we would like to disregard the popular principles on the strength of which one saw oneself compelled either to canonize Spinoza or to condemn him. And still we ask whether we owe him veneration? Spinoza will be venerated as long as there are men who know how to appreciate the inscription on his signet-ring (“caute”) or, to put it plainly: as long as there are men who know what it means to utter [the word]: *independence* [*Unabhängigkeit*].⁴³

Concluding his essay, Strauss refers to *independence*, whose semantic frame includes liberty and freedom: the independence of Spinoza from the community of his origins, the political independence of the Jews, which Strauss considered to be Spinoza’s testament to the Jews (and which Strauss, as a political Zionist, wished for the Jewish nation), and also independence as intellectual freedom, exemplified in different manners by both Spinoza and Cohen. In this respect, Strauss seems to include Cohen implicitly among those who should (or do, even though unaware) “venerate” Spinoza because of Spinoza’s freedom in thinking and philosophizing, if for no other reason. By virtue of being a thinker who was deeply inspired by the spirit of the Enlightenment Cohen might thus be considered an heir of Spinoza’s teaching, namely of his independence and freedom.⁴⁴

V.

The result of Strauss’s evaluation of Cohen’s critique of Spinoza is a successful apology of Baruch Spinoza and his *TPT*. Nevertheless, it might also be considered a vindication of Cohen, namely from two perspectives.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 222 (emphases in the original).

⁴⁴ See also Leo Strauss, “Preface” to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, loc. cit., pp. 137-177, esp. p. 168, where Strauss argues that Cohen seemed unaware of Spinoza’s legacy in his own way of thinking and philosophical assumptions.

First, Cohen's question is taken by Strauss with the seriousness that it deserves: Strauss shows in this case – as in the rest of his life – a reverence not only for Cohen as someone whom he called “a passionate philosopher and a Jew passionately devoted to Judaism”⁴⁵ and whose figure fascinated him from early on, but also for Cohen's teaching from a more strictly philosophical point of view. Strauss articulated the importance of Cohen's legacy for his own approach to Spinoza in his “Preface” to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. In spite of his defense of Spinoza against Cohen's attack, Strauss still seems to look for a legitimate reason for Cohen's attitude towards Spinoza, showing himself as a disciple whose reverence for his master remains untouched by the fact that he can't agree with him. In this sense, Strauss's position is “Cohenian” since he answers questions raised by Cohen in keeping with the philosophical spirit of “independence” that he considers the common property of both, Spinoza and Cohen.

Second, Strauss also seems to follow in Cohen's footsteps in that he espouses independence and freedom of thought while struggling to remain a philosopher and a Jew (if not a believing Jew) in a non- Jewish world. In this sense, Strauss implicitly affirms the relevance of Cohen's legacy for the Jewish philosophical heritage when he takes as starting points for his own inquiries the very questions raised by Cohen. More explicitly, Strauss maintains that what Cohen said “is by no means irrelevant, and is worthy of the study of everyone”⁴⁶ who is concerned with the struggle of being both a philosopher and a Jew. Strauss seems to be “Cohenian” because he shared with Cohen this same struggle, thus inheriting some of Cohen's virtue of fidelity. Delivering a lecture at the Hillel House of the University of Chicago, Strauss argued that “it is impossible not to remain a Jew. It is impossible to run away from one's

⁴⁵ Leo Strauss, “A Giving of Accounts”, repr. in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of the Modernity*, pp. 457-466, esp. p. 460.

⁴⁶ Leo Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews”, repr. in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of the Modernity*, pp. 311-356, esp. p. 344.

origins"⁴⁷; Strauss's argument sounds undoubtedly Cohenian: "It is necessary to accept one's past. That means that out of this undeniable necessity one must make a virtue. The virtue in question is fidelity, loyalty, piety in the old Latin sense of the word *pietas*"⁴⁸. It is worth of notice that Strauss cited Cohen's concept of fidelity also in the second-last paragraph of his "Introductory Essay" to Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason*: "Almost his (*viz.* Cohen's) whole work, his whole life bears testimony to this fidelity and his gratitude to the Jewish heritage—a fidelity limited only by his intellectual probity, by a virtue that he traced to that very heritage"⁴⁹. It seems to me that Strauss, in his lifelong struggle to remain both a philosopher and loyal Jew, exercised the same virtue.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁴⁹ Leo Strauss, "Introductory Essay" in Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, repr. in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, pp. 267-282, esp. p. 281.