

*Assessing Ethical Culture in Germany:
Friedrich Albert Lange, Felix Adler – and Hermann Cohen*

Myriam Bienenstock

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Abstract:

A German Society for Ethical Culture, modelled on the Ethical Culture Society Felix Adler had created in New York in 1876, was founded in Berlin in 1892, which won the support of prominent figures, amongst them that of Hermann Cohen. However, Cohen withdrew his support in the first years of the 20th c.: he contended that universalistic ethical convictions must be defended politically by means of laws, otherwise they risk becoming marginalized, and relapsing into the very ‘confessionalism’ of the sectarian, ‘religious’ communities they purport to eradicate. His argument remains particularly relevant in the realm of education.

In his *An Ethical Philosophy of Life* (1918), the American philosopher and social reformer Felix Adler (1851-1933) attributes to the German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) the following remark: “[I]f there is to be anything like religion in the world hereafter, socialism must be the expression of it.” Adler writes that when he heard that quip he was not convinced, but did see some point in it:

I did not agree with his statement that socialism spells religion, and have not seen my way to this day toward identifying the two. But I realized that there was a measure of truth in what he said, and that I must square myself with the issues that socialism raises.¹

Hermann Cohen is one of the main figures of the Neo-Kantian school in Marburg, and Felix Adler’s Neo-Kantian roots are well-known in the U.S.² However, it is less known that Adler’s thought and activities also had a definite impact in Europe, more particularly in Germany.

Furthermore, it is widely ignored ~~is~~ that Hermann Cohen had been well aware of Adler’s

¹ Felix Adler, *An ethical philosophy of life presented in its main outlines* (hereafter Adler, EPL; New York: Appleton, 1918), 9 f., 11.

² “Adler, Felix” in *Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*, ed. John R. Shook (Bristol: Thoemmes, 2005). Vol. 1, 27-30; Horace L. Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture. Memories and Studies*, ed. Fannia Weingartner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 32-33.

successes: in the U.S., in Europe, and in Germany. He had also reacted, favorably at first³ but then, some ten years later, in a highly critical way.⁴ His reaction has not yet been examined. It raises questions on several substantial issues. They are all related to the question of how to understand ‘secularization’, already been singled out by Felix Adler.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the weight of Felix Adler’s thought and activities in Germany and more particularly in Hermann Cohen’s writings. To achieve that end, it will be necessary to first recur to *The Question of the Workers, in its Significance for Present and Future*,⁵ an essay of the German philosopher and pedagogue Friedrich Albert Lange (1828-1975) which had come out before his famous best-seller, *The History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Importance*.⁶ This latter work became, after only a few years, the most widely read work of Neo-Kantianism as a whole.⁷ But it was the essay on *The Question of the Workers* which induced Hermann Cohen to dub Lange a “philosophical guide of his time”.⁸ It also was that essay on the ‘Labor Question’, as Felix Adler called it, which “proved epoch-making in my [Adler’s] life”.⁹ In his autobiographical sketch, Adler had even gone as far as writing that he had read the essay

³ Letter of Cohen to Natorp dated October 20, 1892, in *Cohen und Natorp*, ed. Helmut Holzhey. Vol. 2, *Der Marburger Neukantianismus in Quellen* (Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1986), 211-212.

⁴ Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens* (hereafter Cohen, ErW), in *Werke*. Vol. 7, 2nd ed. 1907 (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York: Olms, 2002 [1904]): 49-51. Translated by Robert Schine in Hermann Cohen, *Writings on Neo-Kantianism and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Robert S. Schine ([hereafter Cohen, *Writings*]; Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2021), 42-46.

⁵ Friedrich Albert Lange, *Die Arbeiterfrage in ihrer Bedeutung für Gegenwart und Zukunft* (Duisburg: W. Falk & Volmer, 1865; reedited by Julius H. Schoeps, Duisburg: Walter Braun Verlag, 1975). This essay has not been translated into English.

⁶ *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* (Iserlohn: J. Baedeker, 1866. Multiple reeditions). Translation of the 2nd ed. by Ernest Chester Thomas: *The History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Importance* (London: Trübner & Company, 1877–1881; 3rd ed. of this translation with an introduction by Bertrand Russell, 1925).

⁷ Klaus Christian Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus. Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie zwischen Idealismus und Positivismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 233. See also more recently Frederick C. Beiser, *Hermann Cohen. An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: University Press, 2018), 75 sq.

⁸ „ein philosophischer Wegweiser seiner Zeit“: Hermann Cohen, „Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag zur „Geschichte des Materialismus“ von F.A. Lange, 5th edition.” In Cohen, *Werke*. Vol. 5.2 ed. and with an introduction by Helmut Holzhey (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York: Olms, 1984), 111 (*my translation*)

⁹ Adler, EPL, 10.

with burning cheeks; no work of fiction ever excited me as did this little treatise. It was ethical in spirit, if not in its ruling ideas. It favored productive co-operation, and seemed to point a way to immediate action, as socialism did not.¹⁰

Lange's essay on the 'Labor Question' was a main source of inspiration for Felix Adler's foundation in New York, in May 1876, of the *Society for Ethical Culture*.¹¹ It thus is to this essay that the first part of this paper will be devoted. A second part will be devoted to the "German Society for Ethical Culture" (D.G.E.K.) Adler helped create in Berlin in October 1892¹² and to the conflicts that arose within the Society throughout its history. One of the strongest incentives to create it had been an educational question, what kind of religious, 'confessional' instruction should be preserved in public schools? Debates escalated and even led to resounding breaks, when some members decided that ethical instruction should be given in schools *instead of* the traditional religious one, not merely *alongside* it.¹³ In the third and final part of this paper, I shall argue that Hermann Cohen's changing attitude on Ethical culture was not related to his Neo-Kantian philosophical convictions or to an evolution of his position on religion and Judaism, but to that educational debate. What Cohen seems to have feared first and foremost was a relapse into the very risk the German Ethical Culture Society had aimed at avoiding: the 'confessionalism' of exclusive, sectarian 'religious' communities – in today's terminology, 'communitarianism.' Cohen argued that the only way to avoid such a risk was by resorting to the

¹⁰ Adler, EPL, 9 f.

¹¹ Founding Address of Felix Adler, May 15, 1876, New York Society for Ethical Culture, <http://aeu.org/wp-content/uploads/Founding-Address.pdf>.

¹² *Die ethische Bewegung in Deutschland: vorbereitende Mitteilungen eines Kreises gleichgesinnter Männer und Frauen zu Berlin* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1892); Wilhelm Foerster, *Lebenserinnerungen und Lebenshoffnungen* (1832 bis 1910. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1911), 225–236; See also Klaus Christian Köhnke, „Ethische Kultur“, *Neuer Kurs und Sozialdemokratie*, in *Ethischer Sozialismus. Zur politischen Philosophie des Neukantianismus*, ed. Helmut Holzhey (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 283–300; Hermann Lübbe, *Säkularisierung. Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs* (Freiburg: Alber, 3rd ed., 2003 [1955]), 43–49.

¹³ An eloquent overview of these disputes is offered in the "Commemorative publication of the German Society for Ethical Culture, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the American parent organization" (*Die ethische Bewegung in Deutschland. Eine Festgabe der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Ethische Kultur zum fünfzigjährigen Jubiläum der amerikanischen Muttergesellschaft* [hereafter *Festgabe*] Berlin: Verlag für ethische Kultur, 1926).

state, and to general laws. His argument is still highly relevant today, when the question of how to teach ethics in schools has become a burning issue, once again.

I

Felix Adler had encountered Hermann Cohen quite early in his life, when taking part in a Kant reading group the German-Jewish philosopher gathered around him in Berlin in the year 1872.¹⁴ Cohen, at that time, was about 30 years old and he had already begun to make a name for himself in Kant.¹⁵ Adler, 9 years younger and only 21, was still a student. It must have been in those years that he discovered Lange's *Labor Question* and was won by its theses.

He does not specify which edition of the work it had been which aroused his enthusiasm and this is to some extent unfortunate, because there are significant differences between the three editions the pamphlet enjoyed, in a relatively short period of time (1865, 1870 and 1875).¹⁶ The first volume of Marx's *Capital* appeared in 1867 and Lange, who had never been close to Marx or Engels, nevertheless found it necessary to completely rework his text, and expand it for a 2nd and 3rd edition. This did not prevent Marx from fiercely criticizing the work and indeed condemning it, albeit not immediately. But after Eduard Bernstein had explicitly referred to Lange in his famous 1899 work on the *Preconditions of Socialism*, a whole line of 'orthodox' Marxists branded it as being an epitome of 'revisionism'.¹⁷

¹⁴ Cohen, *Werke*. Vol. 15 ed. Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York: Olms, 2009 [1910]), 516-518.

¹⁵ Beiser, *Hermann Cohen*, 54-61.

¹⁶ Ulrich Sieg, *Aufstieg und Niedergang des Marburger Neukantianismus. Die Geschichte einer philosophischen Schulgemeinschaft* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1994), 94 f. –The 1st edition of Lange's *Arbeiterfrage* was reprinted with an introduction by Franz Mehring in 1910 (Berlin: Buchhandlung Vorwärts). The 2nd and 3rd editions were published in Switzerland (Winterthur: Verlag Bleuler-Hausherr&Co, 1870 and 1875).

¹⁷ Eduard Bernstein, *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1899). Translation Henry Tudor: *The preconditions of socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 210; see also Ulrich Sieg, *Aufstieg und Niedergang des Marburger Neukantianismus* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), 94-98.

The socialist leader whose ideas mattered most to Lange¹⁸ had not been Marx, but Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864), founder in 1863 of the *General German Workers' Association* (ADAV) which became the first mass party of socialist action in Germany: it was Lassalle's "Working Man's Programme" (*Arbeiterprogramm*, 1862) that Lange discussed throughout the *Labor Question*. He invoked, approvingly, Lassalle's call for workers' participation in the political process and his campaign for the institution of universal suffrage. He also noted the singular importance of a state Lassalle had not limited to the sole aim of protecting the personal freedom and property of the individual, but endowed with proper moral value.¹⁹ It was to the state that Lassalle had looked for initiating and accomplishing social reforms. Lassalle even went as far as discussing those plans with Bismarck. He was no revolutionary – setting about "to make a revolution," he wrote in his *Working Man's Programme*, is "the folly of immature minds which have no notion of the laws of history" ...²⁰ But he was a socialist, and one of his great successes consisted in transforming the "principle of association" – a principle first put forward by Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch (1808-1883), „the father of the co-operative movement in Germany” – into a politically effective principle.²¹

It was that part of Lassalle's activity which most interested Lange. "It is easy to see," Lange wrote on a page that deserves to be quoted in full:

that the **idea of the working-class** as such will help as little as in its time the **proclamation of human rights**. What is important is actual implementation, and we would not know how to avoid here a renewed predominance of egoism, if the express

¹⁸ Friedrich Albert Lange, *Über Politik und Philosophie. Briefe und Leitartikel 1862 bis 1875*, ed. and elaborated by Georg Eckert (Duisburg: Walter Braun, 1968).

¹⁹ Ferdinand Lassalle, *Gesammelte Reden und Schriften* ed. by Eduard Bernstein (Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1919. Vol. 2), 147-202. Translation Edward Peters: *The Working Man's Programme (Arbeiter-programm). An address by Ferdinand Lassalle* (London: The modern Press, 1884), 44.

²⁰ *The Working Man's Programme*, 22 f.

²¹ William Harbutt Dawson, *German Socialism and Ferdinand Lassalle: A Biographical History of German Socialistic Movements during this Century* (London: Sonnenschein, 1888), 136 f.

principle of brotherhood was not doing its best in the matter. The mere idea of equality of rights for all in the State is neither new enough nor efficient enough that salvation could be expected from it alone. After all, Lassalle also expressly declares that the universal, equal and direct suffrage is only an initial means to the end. The second step consists precisely in the establishment of those productive associations.²² Since according to Lassalle's own view this step ought indeed to be realized on a large scale, but yet successively, what will prevent the workers of such cooperatives (*Genossenschaften*) from directing the advantage of the new institutions to themselves, by virtue of their overwhelming influence, and repeating the history of 1789? Only a new spiritual principle that captures the whole human being, a principle that appears at once as a political and a societal-revolutionary principle, can accomplish this; in a word, a principle that encompasses at once both the dissolution (*Auflösung*) and the accomplishment (*Erfüllung*) of Christianity.²³

Lange went as far as turning 'cooperativeness' (*Genossenschaftlichkeit*) – the constitution of 'cooperatives' – into a completely new organizing principle of societies, one which would be akin to a religious principle inasmuch as it would have the potential of leading to a complete

²² Those first suggested by Schulze-Delitzsch, then by Lassalle in a transformed political form [translator's note].

²³ *Auch sieht man leicht, dass die Idee des Arbeiterstandes an sich so wenig helfen wird, wie seiner Zeit die Proklamirung der Menschenrechte. Es kommt auf die thatsächliche Ausführung an, und wir wussten nicht, wie hier ein neues Vorwalten des Egoismus vermieden werden sollte, wenn nicht das ausdrückliche Princip der Brüderlichkeit das Beste dabei thut? Die bloße Idee der Gleichberechtigung Aller im Staate ist weder so neu noch so wirksam, dass von dieser allein das Heil zu erwarten wäre. Auch erklärt Lassalle ja das allgemeine, gleiche und direkte Wahlrecht ausdrücklich nur für ein erstes Mittel zum Zweck. Der zweite Schritt besteht eben in der Gründung jener Produktiv-Associationen. Da dieser Schritt nach Lassalles eigener Ansicht zwar im Großen, aber doch immerhin successiv ausgeführt werden soll; was wird die Arbeiter dieser Genossenschaften verhindern, sobald sie eine gewisse Stärke erreicht haben, sich durch ihren überwältigenden Einfluss den Vortheil der neuen Einrichtungen allein zuzuwenden, und die Geschichte von 1789 zu wiederholen? Nur ein neues geistiges Princip kann dies thun, und zwar ein Princip, welches den ganzen Menschen ergreift, welches zugleich staatlich, gesellschaftlich revolutionär auftritt; mit einem Worte, ein Princip, welches zugleich die Auflösung und die Erfüllung des Christenthums in sich schließt: Lange, Arbeiterfrage, 1st ed., 149 f.; 2nd ed. (1870), 347 f. Translation mine.*

“corporal and spiritual renewal of the human being”²⁴: Lange made much use of the notion of ‘brotherhood’ (*Brüderlichkeit*, in French *fraternité*). Like many of his contemporaries, he strongly emphasized the religious connotations of the notion.

Hermann Cohen, who famously entertained a very special, “extraordinary relationship” with Lange²⁵, gave another reading to that idea. In his 1896 “Introduction with Critical Appendix” to the fifth edition of Lange’s *History of Materialism and Its Criticism* – one of his favorite texts, reworked three times²⁶ – he engaged in a bold exercise in the history of ideas: he went as far as associating ‘socialism’ with the very idea of a ‘society’ and thereby to the notion of ‘fraternity’, or ‘brotherhood’. He wrote that

The *societas*, which in Roman commercial language means a company, refers already in Stoicism to the *societas generis humani*. From this the term *socialitas* was derived in later, scholarly Latin. Whereas the combination of men into a corporation defined itself and was articulated as a *universitas*, it is the moral and revolutionary drop of blood that flows into the *societas*, even where it only refers to a juridical relationship: *societas jus quodammodo fraternitatis in se habet*. And the association also constitutes a moment of progress in law...²⁷

Cohen was harking back to Roman law – more precisely, to a statement of the jurist Ulpian in the *Digest* (17. 2. 63) – in order to claim that the very notion of ‘society’ (*societas*) includes within itself the idea of *socialitas*, i.e., of an association conceived as ‘brotherhood’: an

²⁴ Lange, *Arbeiterfrage*, 139 f.: translation mine.

²⁵ Beiser, *Hermann Cohen*, 75 f.

²⁶ Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag zur „Geschichte des Materialismus“ von F.A. Lange, 5. Auflage. In Cohen, *Werke*, Vol. 5.2, 1984. With a List of variants to the 1st/2nd/3rd edition [1st ed., 1896].

²⁷ *Schon die societas, die in der römischen Rechtssprache das Compagniegeschäft bedeutet, ist in der Stoa die Societas generis humani, aus welcher in dem späteren Gelehrtenlatein die socialitas sich abzweigte. Während die Verbindung von Menschen zu einer Corporation als universitas sich bestimmte und gliederte, fließt in der societas der moralische, der revolutionäre Blutstropfen, auch wo sie nur ein Rechtsverhältniss bedeutet: societas jus quodammodo fraternitatis in se habet. Und die Assoziation bildet auch rein juristisch ein Moment des Fortschritts im Recht: Cohen, Werke 5.2, 113-114. Translation mine.*

association that would be understood to be universal, and egalitarian. It was to law, not to religion that he looked, in order to find a foundation for his socialist convictions.

Hermann Cohen had identified himself, from the start, as a socialist. He unambiguously distanced himself from those to whom he referred as the “German founders of the political party-socialism” (*den deutschen Begründern des politischen Partei-Sozialismus*): he argued that their “materialism” constitutes “the most irreconcilable contradiction to socialism” (*den unversöhnlichsten Widerspruch gegen den Sozialismus*), but he nevertheless contended that socialism “is in the right, when it is grounded upon the idealism of ethics”.²⁸ He related his conception to Kant, more precisely to the third formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative, which calls for the institution of a “kingdom of ends” in which human beings would treat themselves and all others never merely as means but always at the same time as ends in themselves.²⁹ Whether or not this Kantian formula constitutes a sufficient basis to define socialism can, and was, contested – it is still heavily debated, up to this day, also in the scholarship on Kant.³⁰ Another question which remains open is that of determining if the ‘ethical socialism’ Cohen had tried to further was ever able to gain real weight in the ranks of the German social-democracy.³¹ – In those discussions, the role fulfilled by Felix Adler’s Ethical culture movement is rarely taken into account. Although this may be regretted, the explanation is

²⁸ Cf. the 1896 Introduction to Lange, in *Cohen*, Werke 5.2, 111 f., here 112: *Der Sozialismus ist im Recht, sofern er im Idealismus der Ethik gegründet ist. Und der Idealismus der Ethik hat ihn begründet*: Cohen 1896, LXV f.; *Werke* 5.2, 112 f. *Translation mine*.

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, In Immanuel Kant: *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 83. Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, In *Kants Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902 f.), IV, 433 (Kant’s works in the Akademie edition will be hereafter cited as Kant, AA, followed by volume and page numbers).

³⁰ Van der Linden, Harry, “Cohens sozialistische Rekonstruktion der Ethik Kants,” In Holzhey, *Ethischer Sozialismus*, 146-165; also more recently James Furner, „Can Kant’s Formula of the End in Itself Condemn Capitalism?” In *Kantian Review*, 24, 1, 2019, 1–25.

³¹ Hermann Lübbe, Die politische Theorie des Neukantianismus und der Marxismus, in: *Archiv für Rechts und Sozialphilosophie*, 44 (1958), 333-350, here 348; Norbert Jegelka, Politische Philosophie und Sozialismustheorie im Marburger Neukantianismus. Ein Überblick über ältere und neuere Literatur, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 27 (1987), 616-627, here 618.

simple: Felix Adler always endorsed a critical attitude towards the socialistic ideal. He declared the socialist ideal “ethically spurious, because it omits the notion of right and substitutes for it that of power”³²: he regularly associated the State with power struggles, and he linked those to socialism.³³ He rejected the "collective constraint" which was required, according to him, by this political movement. He asked

whether the run of mankind are capable of cooperative effort on a large scale without the preeminent leadership of master minds; whether Socialism, if carried out, would really breed, as it is expected to, the sentiment of ideal brotherhood; whether the sentiment of brotherhood itself, unless it be rooted in the closer family and national ties, is morally sound, whether the emotional forces that sweep through and overwhelm large aggregations of men, can be bridled and sufficiently enlightened to promote the ends of Socialism. All such questions as these touch the feasibility of the ideal proposed; my own reaction was and is against the ideal itself.³⁴

What Adler wanted to retain from Lange was the sole idea of cooperation – which, he said, “aims at the same result as Socialism by voluntary association instead of by collective compulsion.”³⁵ He later on preferred the notion of ‘organization’ over that of ‘cooperation.’ His own projects for social reforms did change over time. His famous call, put forward as early as 1876, when he founded the *New York Society for Ethical Culture*, was ‘*diversity in the creed, unanimity in the deed*’³⁶: this credo evolved into ‘*deed before creed*’, and then ‘*deed not creed*’.³⁷ But he always remained skeptical of the “efficiency and soundness” of the “broad

³² Adler, EPL, 48.

³³ Adler, EPL, 272.

³⁴ Adler, EPL, 47 f.

³⁵ Adler, EPL, 272.

³⁶ Founding Address of Felix Adler, May 15, 1876, *New York Society for Ethical Culture* (available online), 6.

³⁷ Howard B. Radest, *Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers. Vol.1, 27-30, 27-28.*

sentiment of universal fellowship and fraternity” to which he referred derogatorily as to a kind of “fraternalism”³⁸, and which he associated with ‘socialism.’

His program gave rise to a large number of impressive projects and actions³⁹, amongst them the founding in 1877 of the first district nursing service (now the Visiting Nurse Service) for deprived neighborhoods, and in 1878 of the first free kindergartens for working people in New York City. Members of his Society fought for instituting laws to limit child labor and to protect child laborers, or to improve housing in slums and poor areas of New York. Adler was not just concerned with overcrowding in these neighborhoods, but also with the increase in contagious disease caused by overcrowding, and he established in 1885, *inter alia*, the *Tenement House Building Company* which constructed less expensive housing in New York, mainly in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His achievements were also prompted by a concern, manifestly present in him from the outset, to combat the “degradation” of women and fight discrimination against them: “I had always felt an instinctive, idealizing reverence for women, and this had its influence in the first practical outcome of the philosophy of life with which I started on my career,” he writes.⁴⁰

However, he always continued to define the program of his newly founded Society for Ethical Culture not just as an ethics, but very explicitly as a religion: a “practical religion.”⁴¹ He had been brought up in the Jewish religion: he had received a Jewish Reform education. But he decided to break with Judaism – his decision seems to have been gradual, becoming public only after his return in 1873 from his first trip to Germany. For many years he had accepted the

³⁸ Adler, EPL, 52. See also Adler’s *Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal. Hibbert Lectures* (New York: Appleton, 1924), 129-135.

³⁹ Horace L. Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture. Memories and Studies*, loc. cit.; Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979).

⁴⁰ Adler, EPL, 12; also 7, 12, 143f., 236, 290...

⁴¹ “Founding Address of Felix Adler” (online), 6.

universalism and the ideal of social ethics of the Hebrew prophets. But what he mainly objected to, more and more strongly over the years, seems to have been the particularism of the Jewish religion.⁴²

It may well be in the educational field that his original legacy remains recognized up to this day, particularly in the U.S. One of Adler's primary aims had been to build up appropriate educational institutions. In this field, Adler did not believe that one could draw any inspiration from German sources. In the lectures he gave at the School of Applied Ethics in Plymouth, Mass. in 1891⁴³, he emphasized that "one of the most notable achievements of the American commonwealths" was to have "so distinctly separated between the domain of religion and of politics".⁴⁴ But he also pointed out that no such separation existed in Germany, a country in which schools existed before the state took charge of them, and church and state were united:

In Germany the state has actually encroached upon the Church, has entered church schools and reconstructed them in its own interest. To adopt the German system in America would be to permit the Church to encroach upon the state, to enter state schools and subordinate them to sectarian purposes. The example of Germany can not, therefore, be quoted as a precedent in point.⁴⁵

Adler thus contended that although it was imperative to give a moral instruction to children, such instruction should be "unsectarian", that is, "outside the domains of the churches."

Soon after having spoken at the School for Applied Ethics, in Plymouth, he left for Europe: he gave lectures in England and also undertook a trip to Germany lasting several

⁴² Adler, EPL, Chap. 2: 20 ff.; Michael Meyer, "Beyond Particularism: On Ethical Culture and the Reconstructionists," *Commentary*, L I, 3, March 1971, 72-73; Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to ethical culture*, Chap. 2 and 3.

⁴³ The lectures were published in 1892 as *The Moral Instruction of Children* (New York: Appleton, 1892) and promptly translated into German by Georg von Gizycki: *Der Moralunterricht der Kinder* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1894).

⁴⁴ Adler, *Moral Instruction of Children*, 6.

⁴⁵ Adler, *Moral Instruction of Children*, 8-9.

months, during which he was invited to give reports on his activity towards setting up and developing a Society for Ethical Culture in the U.S. He gave such a report on at least two occasions in Berlin.⁴⁶ When the German Society for Ethical Culture was finally founded in October 1892, he was back in the U.S. and did not personally take part in the event, but it was the model offered by his Society which served as its basic source of inspiration.⁴⁷

II

„World-Betterment from a ‘Scientific Worldview’“(Weltverbesserung aus ,wissenschaftlicher Weltanschauung’): it is under such a heading that the German Ethical Culture Society could appropriately be placed.⁴⁸ Several associations with a comparable program were also established in Germany during the second half of the 19th c.; and the D.G.E.K. was neither the earliest nor the most important of them: the “German Freethinkers Association” (*Deutscher Freidenkerbund*) of Ludwig Büchner had already been created in 1881, and the “German Monists Association” (*Deutscher Monistenbund*, 1906) was the association with by far the greatest impact. Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), the famous biologist who introduced Darwin’s theories to Germany⁴⁹, was its inspirational and honorary President. Some members of the D.G.E.K. also belonged to other associations – for example Friedrich Jodl (1849-1914), a German-Austrian Feuerbach specialist who was a member of the *Deutscher Monistenbund* as well as a co-founder of the D.G.E.K.⁵⁰ Many were or became famous later on: the first president of the D.G.E.K., Wilhelm Julius Förster (1832-1921), was an eminent astronomer who in

⁴⁶ Wilhelm Foerster, *Lebenserinnerungen und Lebenshoffnungen* (1832 bis 1910. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1911), 225–236.

⁴⁷ See above, *** and *Festgabe*; also Horace L. Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture*, 111-112, 116-118.

⁴⁸ Lübke, *Politische Philosophie in Deutschland*, 124 and 140-141.

⁴⁹ Lübke, *Politische Philosophie in Deutschland*, 140; id., *Säkularisierung*, 47-49 and Köhnke, ‚Ethische Kultur‘, 292-293.

⁵⁰ Cf. also Anne Siegetsleitner, On Friedrich Jodl’s “Morals in History”, in *Ethics* 125 (October 2014): 211–213.

1891/92 became Rector of the Berlin University; Georg von Gizycki (1851-1895), Felix Adler's closest contact⁵¹, founded *Ethische Kultur*, the Society's "weekly journal for social-ethical reforms" which accompanied the Society throughout its existence (until 1936); the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) remained faithful to the Society until his death; and several Neo-Kantians also became members, amongst them Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, and Karl Vorländer.⁵²

The seat of the Society always remained Berlin, but Ethical Culture Societies were founded in twelve other German cities and in German-speaking cities of other countries: Vienna (Austria), and Zürich (Switzerland). Its members were mostly academics and relatively few in number – 2,000 in some years, mainly in Berlin. But it expanded its activities into diverse areas of life: publishing, with the prolific *Ethische Kultur*; lecturing and dispatching lecturers to different towns; setting up public reading rooms and public libraries, as well as information centers on welfare care⁵³; and endeavoring, mainly, to intervene in the educational system.

What had motivated the creation of the D.G.E.K. was a specific educational issue: a project had been put forward in 1892 by the Prussian Minister of Education Robert von Zedlitz-Trützschler, which would have made it impossible, had it been implemented, to maintain the existing arrangement in 'interdenominational schools' (*Simultanschulen*) as they existed then, according to which pupils of different religions were taught jointly in most classes, and separately only for religious instruction.⁵⁴ The project stipulated, amongst other regulations, that

⁵¹ Cf. also Friedrich Jodl, Georg von Gizycki and the Science of Ethics, in *International Journal of Ethics* 5/1895, 500-506.

⁵² Köhnke, *Ethische Kultur*, *loc.cit.*, 292 f.

⁵³ *Festgabe*, 8 f.; also „Die drei berühmten Foersters und die ethische Kultur. Humanismus in Berlin um 1900.“ In: *Humanismus und Humanisierung*. Ed. by Horst Groschopp (Aschaffenburg 2014, Schriftenreihe der Humanistischen Akademie Berlin-Brandenburg, 7), 157–173.

⁵⁴ On the organization of *Simultanschulen*, see Friedrich Paulsen, *Geschichte des gelehrten Unterrichts auf den deutschen Schulen und Universitäten vom Ausgang des Mittelalters bis zur Gegenwart. Mit besonderer Rücksicht*

teachers be, wherever possible, of the same confession as the majority of their pupils – and employed only once they had passed an examination in which a representative of the ecclesiastical authority with voting rights took part. Furthermore, new elementary schools were to be established only on a denominational basis⁵⁵, which prompted a fear, particularly amongst the intelligentsia, that the reform would substantially increase clerical influence in public elementary schools, ultimately transforming them into confessional ones. Heated protests arose, as a result of which the proposal was withdrawn. A new school bill was advanced only in 1906, after debates much more subdued than those of 1892. However, it was during 1892-1893 that the D.G.E.K. itself was created. A mood of optimism seems to have reigned in those years following Bismarck's removal from power in 1890 and the repeal of the exceptional laws against the socialists; and many were led to believe that reforms could be implemented. There were even liberals, particularly amongst the left-oriented, who believed that class fraternization was possible, also with social-democratic groups.⁵⁶ Some leading figures of the D.G.E.K., amongst them Georg von Gizycki himself, seem indeed to have been quite close to the German social-democratic party – but this was not known in the wider public, in any case at that time.⁵⁷

The D.G.E.K.'s ambivalence on matters of religion seems however to have been noted – and sometimes deplored: already in 1892, the philosopher of law Rudolf Stammler (1856-1938), who had been close to Marburg's Neo-Kantian circles, wrote to Natorp that he had decided not to join the new formation, because it ought to have been much clearer in its criticism of

auf den klassischen Unterricht. 2 vol. (Leipzig: Veit/Metzger & Wittig, 1885). Trans. T. Lorenz: *German Education Past and Present* (London: Unwin, 1908), 256-257.

⁵⁵ On the Zedlitz-Trutzschler bill proposal, see J. Alden Nichols, *Germany After Bismarck. The Caprivi Era 1890-1894* (Harvard: University Press, 1958), 160-191; Geoffrey Field, Religion in the German Volksschule, 1890-1928, *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 25 (1980), 41-7 and Marjorie Lamberti, *State, Society & the Elementary School in Imperial Germany* (Oxford: University Press, 1989), 161-171, 154-210; particularly 130 and 206-207.

⁵⁶ See J. Alden Nichols, *Germany After Bismarck*, Part One; also Klaus Christian Köhnke, „Ethische Kultur“, *Neuer Kurs und Sozialdemokratie*, in Holzhey, *Ethischer Sozialismus*, 283-300.

⁵⁷ Köhnke on „Ethische Kultur“, in Holzhey 1994, 286 f.

everything that was immoral in the religious commands; and then Stammler asked if the hidden reason for which the Society showed itself so timorous in its criticism of Religion could be that many were scared to death by socialism⁵⁸... However, many amongst the early adherents to the Society were freethinkers or even declared atheists, so that the Society soon earned the reputation of being irreligious, even if it never officially endorsed atheism.⁵⁹ – Discussing the Zedlitz project in his article entitled “Morality, Religion and School. Contemporary reflections on the Prussian school law” – an article which enjoyed a wide, positive reception at the time of its publication⁶⁰ – Friedrich Jodl engages in a fascinating discussion of the Prussian government’s claim that schools imperatively need to include the teaching of ethics in their curriculum yet cannot possibly teach it without religion. He points out that the practice of teaching ethics without religion already exists, in France, where a law dated March 28, 1882 – the “Loi Jules Ferry” – had made elementary education compulsory, whilst leaving to all parents the option of giving their children religious instruction – or none – thereby making a “giant step” out of the Middle Ages.⁶¹ Quoting several French treatises devoted to the presentation of a “secular morality” (*morale laïque*) which he finds excellent, he wonders why these treatises and with them the whole French debate over *laïcité* had remained foreign to Germans: could this have been due to the fact that in centralized France progress towards the constitution of a universally-valid ethics takes its origin in the State, in a political initiative moving from top to bottom, whereas in Germany – and for that matter in England – it advances from bottom upwards, in the association of individuals towards the formation of a community?⁶² It is at that

⁵⁸ Rudolf Stammler to Natorp, 22.12.92 in H. Holzhey, *Cohen und Natorp* 2: 212-215.

⁵⁹ Lübke, *Säkularisierung*, 47-49.

⁶⁰ The article was published for the first time in 1892, in a Supplement to the German daily *Allgemeine Zeitung*, then separately. It is reprinted in Friedrich Jodl, *Vom Lebenswege*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart/Berlin: Cotta 1917), 270-292.

⁶¹ *Vom Lebenswege*. 2, 285-291 and 287.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 291.

point that Jodl informs his readers on the creation, in the great cities of England and America, of Ethical Societies, which want to have an impact upon adults as well as upon children by means of a purely ethical teaching, and thereby “replace the church community for their members” (*die Kirchengemeinschaft ersetzen*).⁶³ But he does not further explicate the meaning of that startling sentence. He is somewhat more explicit in a programmatic lecture which he gave some months later before the Frankfurt Section of the D.G.E.K. There he claimed that the purpose of the D.G.E.K. would be to rely upon the “science of moral life” (*Wissenschaft vom sittlichen Leben*) – a science which would draw, just like the natural sciences, upon “Reason and Experience” (*Vernunft und Erfahrung*) and not upon metaphysics or religion, the aim being to work towards the “ethical perfection of Mankind”.⁶⁴

In this lecture, Jodl also added that the D.G.E.K. had no intention whatsoever of engaging in a fight against the churches, but wanted to work in association with them.⁶⁵ The declaration of intent was not enough to silence the conflict, which was internal to the society: members fought over the question of whether ethical instruction should be given in schools *instead of* the traditional religious instruction, or merely *alongside* it. – “Let us for once try to make a religion out of ethics itself, only out of it”, Ferdinand Tönnies, then Director of the D.G.E.K. section in Kiel, intoned.⁶⁶ Others disagreed, Paul Natorp among them: the Neo-Kantian philosopher of education argued that a Christian foundation of the elementary school was still indispensable in Germany, and insisted upon the beneficial effect of faith and biblical, poetical readings upon

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 291-292.

⁶⁴ „Wir wollen arbeiten an der sittlichen Vervollkommnung der Menschheit [...also] Diese Wissenschaft vom sittlichen Leben wollen wir vom Katheder hinaustragen auf den Markt, wollen sie populär machen, wollen ihr eine Stimme geben im öffentlichen Leben und in der Erziehung“: *Wesen und Ziel der ethischen Bewegung in Deutschland*: nach einem Vortrage, gehalten am 13. Februar 1893 in der Abtheilung Frankfurt a.M. der Deutschen Gesellschaft für ethische Kultur (Frankfurt: Knauer, 1893). Republished in Jodl, *Vom Lebenswege*. Vol. 2, op.cit., 195-217, here 207.

⁶⁵ Jodl, *Vom Lebenswege*, 2, 210.

⁶⁶ „Wir wollen es einmal versuchen, aus der Ethik selber eine Religion zu machen, aus ihr ganz allein“: Ferdinand Tönnies, *Ethische Cultur und ihr Geleite* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1893), 17.

young minds.⁶⁷ Jodl responded, that “what one finds in the religious is not that which is common, but that which divides” (*im Religiösen liegt nicht das Gemeinsame, sondern das Trennende*)⁶⁸; and on that question Hermann Cohen sided with Jodl, not with Natorp.⁶⁹ What he rejected was the “conflict (*Widerstreit*) of Religion with Ethics”: a conflict about which he said that it already appears “in the possibility to talk about religion in the plural”: it is such a possibility which “turns religion into the confession, and crumbles the unity of humanity into communities of fellow-believers”.⁷⁰ His foremost objection to that which he called there ‘religion’ was the propensity to arouse a plurality of ‘confessions,’ or religious ‘communities’ (*Gemeinden*). What Cohen rejected was ‘confessionalism’ – and also, manifestly, that which we often call today ‘communitarianism’, a notion the longtime member of the D.G.E.K. Ferdinand Tönnies famously helped to create with his work *Community and Society* (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*).⁷¹

The “Introduction with Critical Postscript” to the fifth edition of Lange’s *History of Materialism and Its Criticism* shows that Cohen’s decision to support Jodl also reflects a deeper agreement with Ethical culture. In that Introduction, which was published for the first time in 1896, a few years after the foundation of the D.G.E.K., Cohen, who still alludes to the fight over a confessional bill which had led to the creation of the Society, insists that

The plural turns religion into the confession, and crumbles the unity of humanity into communities of fellow-believers. The expression ‘confession’ also harms the principle of autonomy, which should not be allowed to be acknowledged by following a Book of the

⁶⁷ Cf. Paul Natorp, Zur Schulfrage. In *Ethische Kultur* 1/14, dated 1.4.1893, 109-111.

⁶⁸ Jodl, Zur Schulfrage, *ibid.*, 112 f.: cf. also the letter of Cohen to Natorp dated **April 13, 1893** in Holzhey, *Cohen und Natorp* 2, 215-21, here 217.

⁶⁹ *Cohen und Natorp* 2, 204-206.

⁷⁰ „Der Plural macht aus der Religion die Confession, und zerbröckelt die Einheit der Menschheit in die Gemeinden der Glaubensgenossen“.

⁷¹ Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1887. Trans. *Community and Society* (East Lansing: Michigan State U.P., 1957).

Covenant, but must be rediscovered in every moment of life, in the strict discipline of conscience of the individual, in humility and audacity. This is the reason for which it is the slogan *Resolution of religion into ethics* which counts for ethics as a science.⁷²

It was Kant whom Cohen praised, mainly for having introduced the concept of autonomy in the contemporary discussion of the relation between ethics and religion.⁷³ But when he discussed that question it was not Kant, but Lange whom he actually followed, for it was Lange who had resorted to the very term *Auflösung* ('resolution') in order to write, on one of the pages which had also left an indelible impression upon the young Felix Adler, that a new "spiritual principle" ought to be created which would contain in itself, at one and the same time, the "resolution" (*Auflösung*) and the "accomplishment" (*Erfüllung*) of Christianity.⁷⁴ The resounding slogan of a "resolution of religion into ethics," launched in the 1st edition of Cohen's text (1896), reappeared in the 2nd edition (1902), to be replaced in the 3rd edition (1914) by that of an "uptake" of religion into ethics (*Aufnahme der Religion in die Ethik*)⁷⁵: this is certainly less provocative, but the content remains the same. One of the most striking formulations may also be found in the Introduction to the *Ethics of Pure Will* (1st ed., 1904; 2nd ed., 1907):

Only when religion abandons all its other questions and tenets – that is, only when it makes ethics its sole and exclusive task – only then can the allness [*Allheit*: totality]⁷⁶ of human beings be its true goal. Then, however, religion will no longer have any interest in so-

⁷² *Der Plural macht aus der Religion die Confession, und zerbröckelt die Einheit der Menschheit in die Gemeinden der Glaubensgenossen. Auch verletzt der Ausdruck der Confession das Prinzip der Autonomie, die nicht gestanden werden darf nach einem Bundesbuche, sondern in jedem Momente des Lebens in der strengen Gewissensarbeit des Individuums in Demuth und Wagemuth neu entdeckt werden muss. Daher gilt für die Ethik als Wissenschaft die Losung: Auflösung der Religion in Ethik. Das Interesse des Individuums, welches zum Theil von der Religion vertreten wird, ist in der Autonomie zum grundlegenden Princip der Ethik geworden. Die Religion dagegen verlässt das Princip des Individuums, indem sie Sondergemeinschaften züchtet, die die Autonomie der Person bedrohen und vernichten* : 1st ed. of the 1896 Introduction, LIX; reproduced in Cohen, *Werke* 5.2, 106 and 140: translation mine.

⁷³ 1896 Introduction, LIII-LXVI; also in Cohen, *Werke* 5.2, 97-100 and 139 f.

⁷⁴ Cf. above, note 23.

⁷⁵ Cohen, *Werke* 5.2, 1st variant 140, 3rd variant 106.

⁷⁶ On that term, see also below, note 101.

called faith. Then it can and must strive to formulate its teaching as a kind of knowledge.

Religion must resolve itself [*sich aufheben*] into ethics.⁷⁷

aufheben means cancelling, but also at the same time preserving: it has often been translated into English with ‘sublating,’ or ‘superseding.’⁷⁸ When Cohen writes that religion must ‘supersede’ itself into ethics, he certainly does not intend to reject religion as such. Ever since the very beginning of his career as a Kant scholar, he had credited himself for having “taken with him” God – more precisely, the Kantian God – in his reading of Kant’s ethics.⁷⁹

This point had been perfectly understood by Felix Adler: Adler writes in his *Ethical Philosophy of Life* that the “net outcome” of Cohen’s teaching in Berlin in 1872, had been for him “the definite and permanent disappearance of the individualistic conception of Deity” – but not “atheism in the moral sense”, for he would never have been what is called an atheist.”⁸⁰

Cohen seems to have well remembered Felix Adler, many years after the early encounter in Berlin.⁸¹ He must have known that the young American had followed him on that point. He also certainly knew that his teaching had had a certain impact on the young American, in the first place in understanding and accepting Kant: Adler himself also became later on a recognized Kant scholar.⁸² Noticeably enough, however, what Cohen says about Ethical culture in the Introduction to his *Ethics of Pure Will* is rather cautious. To be sure, he writes,

⁷⁷ Nur wenn die Religion alle ihre anderen Probleme und Glaubenssachen aufgibt, das heisst, wenn sie die Sittlichkeit allein und ausschliesslich zu ihrem Problem macht, nur dann könnte die Allheit der Menschen ihr wahrhaftes Ziel werden. Dann aber hat sie kein Interesse am sogenannten Glauben mehr, dann kann und muss sie streben, ihren Lehrgehalt zu einem Wissen zu machen, und so muss sie in Ethik sich aufheben: Cohen, *Werke* 7, 60f.; *Writings*, 51.

⁷⁸ On that term see Hans-Friedrich Fulda in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* ed. by Joachim Ritter. Vol. I, 618 f. and for the English translation Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 283-285.

⁷⁹ Hermann Cohen, *Briefe* (Ed. by Bertha and Bruno Strauss, Berlin: Schocken, 1939), 42 f.

⁸⁰ Adler, EPL, 9.

⁸¹ Cohen, *Werke* 15, 516 f.

⁸² Cf. for example Felix Adler, A Critique of Kant's Ethics. In: *Mind*, Vol. 11, No. 42 (Apr., 1902), 162-195.

one might wish to adopt a sympathetic posture toward a movement that flies the banner of ethics and seeks to gather and unite human beings of any faith and tribe, and all of this in an era beset by a confusion of humanitarian feeling and by economic greed.⁸³

Cohen thereupon engages in a devastating criticism of Ethical culture. What could have been his reasons?

III

In his Festive gift to the American Ethical Culture Society, the convinced freethinker and educator Rudolph Penzig (1855-1931), who became General Secretary of the D.G.E.K. in 1893 and editor of *Ethische Kultur* from 1897 onwards, reports that strong differences of opinion had developed in the German Society, more particularly on the basic question of a religious education, in schools, by the Churches.⁸⁴ The differences were so strong that they led to the adoption in 1903 of a new program, which called for the “secularization (*Verweltlichung*) of the State’s entire life, and of the public school in the first place.”⁸⁵ Affiliated societies were also created that tried to further the debate, with names like “Secular School” (*Weltliche Schule*), or the “League for a Secular School and a Moral Instruction” (*Bund für weltliche Schule und Moralunterricht*).⁸⁶ But the predominantly negative attitude of members towards any religious instruction whatsoever at school ultimately led several leading personalities to resign from their positions in the D.G.E.K.: the Society had become too anti-religious for them. This seems to have been the case of Wilhelm Foerster himself, one of the founders, and also of Friedrich

⁸³ Cohen, *Werke* 7, 49; *Writings*, 42.

⁸⁴ *Festgabe*, 6.

⁸⁵ *Festgabe*, 6.

⁸⁶ *Festgabe*, 13 f.

Wilhelm Foerster, one of his famous sons, who after 1900 leaned more towards Catholicism.⁸⁷ The hypothesis that Cohen stopped participating to the Society's activities for similar reasons, also in those years, seems plausible, in any case at first sight. However, a closer look does not confirm such a claim.

Hermann Cohen was undoubtedly much better acquainted with what happened in Germany than with developments in the U.S. or other countries, and it makes sense to argue that what he bewailed was in the first place the evolution of the D.G.E.K. He had certainly noticed its metamorphosis into a society which functioned as a kind of *Ersatz* for the more traditional religions: Sunday sermons were organized, during which religious and moral ideals, and also social ones, were discussed by preachers, in a kind of “secular pastoral care” (*weltliche Seelsorge*). There also were “naming celebrations” to replace baptism, as well as wedding and funeral ceremonies.⁸⁸ These events took place mainly in Berlin, and Cohen, who was a member, was informed. He could not welcome them – what sense does it make to invent a new religion when many already exist, some even centered upon ethics?

Cohen believed that the Jewish religion had come first in that matter: its ethical message would already have been embodied in the Bible, more precisely in the Hebrew prophetism.⁸⁹ However, he deplored that this essential contribution of Hebrew prophetism to ethics had remained unacknowledged – he even went as far as insisting, in an article which called for “The edification of Chairs for Ethics and Philosophy of Religion in Jewish-theological institutions” (1904), that it would be impossible to properly appreciate the significance of Judaism as long as

⁸⁷ Horst Groschopp, *Die drei berühmten Foersters und die ethische Kultur. Humanismus in Berlin um 1900*, *op.cit.* See also Susanne Enders, *Moralunterricht und Lebenskunde* (Bad Heilbrunn: Klinckschardt, 2002).

⁸⁸ E.g. Groschopp, *Dissidenten*, loc.cit.; also Lübke 140 f.

⁸⁹ See for example the lecture Cohen gave in 1910 before the “World Congress for Religious Progress” on “The Significance of Judaism for the Progress of Religion” in Cohen: *Werke* 15, 429-454; contemporary English translation 455-476, also available today in *Writings*, 150-166.

one would merely highlight its ethical teachings.⁹⁰ In that article, he also inserted a sentence critical of Ethical Culture, whose “fundamental mistake” (*grundsätzlicher Fehler*) would have been not to have understood that the science of ethics will remain a truncated body as long as one would detach from it the concept of God.⁹¹ The temptation is great, to relate that argument to Adler’s glaring omission of any reference to ‘God’ in the Temple sermon of October 11, 1873 which marked his return to America after his first visit to Germany: the incident had soon become quite famous, and echoes of it had probably reached Cohen. It also is quite certain, even if no documentary evidence seems to exist to prove it, that Cohen had heard about Adler’s decision to ‘separate’ from that which is called, in *The Ethical Philosophy of Life*, the “religion of Israel”: Adler had had strong words to depict the ideal of social justice hailed by the Hebrew prophets, but he had also judged that the truth contained in the Hebrew religion – and even, for that matter, in the Christian one – was not capable of adaptation to “the needs and conditions of the modern age”.⁹² Cohen certainly did not appreciate.

Still, the article of 1904 had been written for a German-Jewish audience, about Germany and developments in that country. Antisemitism was soaring in those years, particularly in Germany. The tide had not affected the D.G.E.K.: it always remained unequivocal in its opposition to antisemitism, and in favor of religious tolerance. As early as 1892, Wilhelm Foerster had held a lecture before the Society on “The Jewish Question and the Ethics of Nationalism” in which, evoking the Jewish origins of Felix Adler, he emphasized that Jews were accepted in the D.G.E.K. “with open arms.” Foerster also insisted that the Society wanted to

⁹⁰ *Die Errichtung von Lehrstühlen für Ethik und Religionsphilosophie an den jüdisch-theologischen Lehranstalten*, reprinted in Hermann Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften* (Berlin: Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), Vol. 2), 108-132.

⁹¹ *Loc.cit.*, 121 f.

⁹² Adler, EPL, 16f.

combat nationalism as well as orthodoxy – both German, and Jewish.⁹³ Cohen completely agreed, to both fights. But he could well have objected to the policy Felix Adler himself, followed by Ethical culture and the D.G.E.K., had been adopting with regard to the Jewish contribution to ethics: he could have thought that omitting to mention the essential role fulfilled by the prophets of Israel in the elaboration of the ethical principle was liable to help, if only *volens nolens*, the strengthening of antisemitism. This could help to explain why he insists, also in the pages of the *Ethics of Pure Will* devoted to the criticism of Ethical culture, that the question ‘whence’ is essential, as essential as the question ‘whither’, when what is at stake is ethics and its relation to religion.⁹⁴

However, Cohen’s main reason for criticizing Ethical culture in the *Ethics of pure Will* was much broader in scope, and fundamental. The *Ethics of pure Will* was his major work in ethics, and what he wanted to present in it was his own conception – a Kantian one – of the philosophical science of ethics. He had been ready to make common cause with Jodl, who was not a Kantian, in order to fight confessionism. But he also had compelling philosophical reasons, as a Kantian, to criticize it, and in that work it is with those reasons – in other terms, purely Kantian arguments – that he decides to begin his criticism. He had regularly insisted, from his first works onwards, upon the necessity to clearly distinguish between the description and understanding of the human nature on the one hand, and normative questions on the other – between ‘is’ and ‘ought’; also lauding Kant for having promoted such a thesis.⁹⁵ He had already explained in his first opus magnum, *Kant’s Theory of Experience* (1st ed., 1871), that it would be

⁹³ Cf. Wilhelm Foerster, Zur Ethik des Nationalismus und der Judenfrage. Vortrag gehalten am 23. November 1892 zu Berlin in der Deutschen Gesellschaft für ethische Kultur (online: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=osu.32435015846579&view=1up&seq=1>), 18; also Jodl, *Wesen und Ziel der ethischen Bewegung in Deutschland*, 13-14: repr. in *Vom Lebenswege*. 2. Band, Stuttgart/Berlin 1917, 212-215. See also *Die ethische Bewegung in Deutschland*, loc. cit., 5, 12.

⁹⁴ Cohen, *Werke* 7, 52; *Writings*, 45.

⁹⁵ *Kants Begründung der Ethik* (1877. 2nd ed., 1910) in Cohen, *Werke* 2, 5 sq., 98 f.

a fundamental error to give to the term ‘innate’ a psychological meaning instead of understanding it philosophically, as an *a priori*.⁹⁶ He now directs that denunciation against Ethical Culture and its adepts: they would commonly presuppose that morality is ‘innate’, self-evident in the nature of the human being and thereby allude – wrongly – to psychological capacities upon which one could build in one’s educational work:

The ethical is said to be natural; that is, innate in the human being, like all human drives. For it is apparently not permitted to go beyond the drives. In this philosophical camp, thinking and cognition are not taken to be innate, but only sensation and perception, from which thinking and cognition, as they say, develop. In the same way, moral feeling and willing are said to develop gradually from the instincts and from the activities of the drives. This is how the innate is understood: it is that which develops gradually from the natural forces of the drives. This process of development, then, means that the ethical is the natural outcome and result. The ethical thus appears to be self-evident.⁹⁷

Cohen objects that one cannot raise human beings to morality naturally, by following their natural impulses, and their particular attachments, be they family or other groupings – how will it ever be possible to reach universality, when one starts from such attachments and impulses?

To find an answer to that question, Cohen focuses upon the concept of a ‘human being’ (*Mensch*). He writes that the concept is highly ambiguous: does it refer to a singular, or to a plural? What kind of unity could be meant by it? Already on the very first pages of the Introduction to the *Ethics of Pure Will*, Cohen had pointed out that these are not theological questions, but logical ones.⁹⁸ He had even gone as far as referring his readers, on that point, to his own commentary of Kant’s table of categories, in his *Logic of Pure Knowledge (Logik der*

⁹⁶ Cohen, *Werke* 1.1, p. 255 f., 279 ff.

⁹⁷ Cohen, *Werke* 7, 53; *Writings*, 45.

⁹⁸ Cohen, *Werke* 7, 4 f. *Writings*, 5.

reinen Erkenntnis)⁹⁹: in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had defined the category of *Allheit* (“allness, totality”) as “nothing other than plurality considered as a unity”¹⁰⁰; and Cohen, commenting that definition, had already given ‘all human beings’ as an example: what kind of a ‘whole’ could it be, which would embody ‘all’ human beings? In the *Ethics of Pure Will*, he furthers this line of thought. He explains that one ought to distinguish between a whole that merely gathers all human beings in a ‘totality’ (*Totalität*), and a whole in which one considers their “allness” (*Allheit*): ‘all’ of them, also taken as singulars.¹⁰¹ For us to understand what a human being is, we must also envisage, from the start, an “allness.” But this would be one of the first theoretical mistakes made by Ethical culture: it “diverts from the problem of the totality (*Allheit*), because it is taken for granted that what is ethical depends on the individual”¹⁰².

Ethical culture would thereby make another mistake, one which would even be a more serious one, in any case according to Cohen: it would divert attention from the “context of problems” in which morality would be located: that of the state.¹⁰³ – But, Cohen writes, whatever is ‘moral’, or ‘ethical’ (*das Sittliche*), cannot be correctly understood unless one also envisages the political context in which it is located. He even goes as far as arguing that “the ethical may be subordinated to practical culture only in political movements”¹⁰⁴; and one cannot but wonder at the extreme character of this statement: what could be meant by it?

⁹⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allan Wood (Cambridge: U.P., 1998), 212-218 (AA B 106-116).

¹⁰⁰ *Op.cit.*, 215 (AA B 111).

¹⁰¹ Cohen, *Werke* 6, 205. Translating *Allheit* with ‘totality’ is misleading, but a better translation into English does not seem to be available: see on this Cohen, *Writings*, xxvf.; also Frederick C Beiser, *Hermann Cohen: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 229. In this article, I shall nevertheless follow the suggestion of P. Guyer and A. Wood in their translation of Kant’s first *Critique* (see above, note 73) and translate *Allheit* with the neologism ‘allness’.

¹⁰² *Von diesem Problem der Allheit lenkt die ethische Kultur ab, weil die Selbstverständlichkeit des Sittlichen am Individuum hängt*: Cohen, *Werke* 7, 51; *Writings*, 43 (in press: translation modified).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*: *Indem er [der Gedanke der ethischen Kultur] von der Allheit ablenkt im Ausgang, lenkt er zugleich ab von dem Zusammenhang der Probleme, in dem das Sittliche steht, und in dem allein es behandelt werden muss. Der Staat stellt diesen Zusammenhang dar.*

¹⁰⁴ Cohen, *Werke* 7, 51; *Writings*, 43.

Cohen must be alluding to the socialist political movements, for he does take sides, later on in the *Ethics of Pure Will*, for the conception of a state socialism elaborated by Ferdinand Lassalle; thereby also adding that such a conception would make room for a “society” (*Gesellschaft*) understood on the basis of “cooperative associations” (*Genossenschaften*).¹⁰⁵ However, he does not mention socialism in the pages which he explicitly devotes to the criticism of Ethical culture, and this is significant: he manifestly does not want to make his criticism of Ethical culture dependent upon his socialistic views. Felix Adler, who played the role of a tutelary figure at the time of the foundation of the German Ethical culture Society, could have been amongst those who encouraged its founders to refrain from publicly expressing socialist convictions; for although he had explicitly declared himself in agreement with the basic ‘cooperative’ goal of socialism, he had been very critical of the socialist ideal – and also of the political conception he associated with it.¹⁰⁶ He must have believed it unwise to explicitly relate the D.G.E.K. to a political movement, whichever that movement might have been. It is precisely the absence of such a political affiliation that Cohen deplors in the *Ethics of Pure Will*: according to him, one of the major weaknesses of Ethical culture is not to have been ready to situate itself politically.

This accusation rests upon a strikingly political conception of the human being (*Mensch*), already developed on the very first pages of the Introduction to the *Ethics of Pure Will*. Contrarily to what was often contended later on, the Neo-Kantian philosopher did not limit his interest to problems of the philosophy of science.¹⁰⁷ He also attached much importance to political philosophy, more precisely to the practical, political mission incumbent upon

¹⁰⁵ Cohen, *Werke* 7, 254 f.

¹⁰⁶ See above, p.**

¹⁰⁷ See for example Manfred Riedel (ed.), *Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie*, I (Freiburg: Rombach, 1972), 9 f.; and Myriam Bienenstock, Quelle réhabilitation pour la philosophie pratique? In: Myriam Bienenstock and André Tosel (eds.), *La raison pratique au XXe s. Trajets et figures* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004), 17-42.

Universities since the Enlightenment: being at the forefront of the fight for freedom, in a cosmopolitan sense of the term.¹⁰⁸ In the Introduction to the *Ethics of Pure Will*, he thus goes back to the Greek philosophical tradition of a *polis* and to Plato¹⁰⁹, in order to argue that the category of ‘allness’ (*Allheit*), to which one resorts when one refers to ‘all human beings’, can have various degrees: sometimes it refers to “the *universitas* of a class or of a city, at another moment the *universitas* of a state, and finally the *universitas* of humankind¹¹⁰”; and then he contends that for us to reach the ‘allness’ of mankind, we must focus upon the political state and not upon any other group, whether social – a class – or religious, whichever religion this would be. He firmly rejects the association, common in his time, of the state to a ‘power’ (*Macht*) devoid of any ethical dimension¹¹¹; and it is to the state that he relates universality.

Cohen believed that it was the refusal of Ethical culture to affiliate itself politically which also explained why it could not succeed in realizing its initial purpose of “eradicating the exclusiveness” of Religion, and reverted to being yet another religious sect:

Ethical culture confronts religion for the purpose of eradicating the exclusivity to which religion falls prey. It is so consistent that it also confronts one-sidedness in politics. Nevertheless, it is also active outside the political arena. Unavoidably, then, it is marginalized as a religious sect. Whenever ethics is taken up as an issue outside the realm of politics, it inevitably lands in the confines of a cloister, no matter how hostile the attitude toward religious dogma.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Lübke, *Politische Philosophie in Deutschland*, loc.cit., 89 f. ; also id., *Säkularisierung*, loc.cit., 45 f.

¹⁰⁹ Cohen, *Werke* 7, 6; *Writings* (in press), 6.

¹¹⁰ *Die Allheit der Menschen bildet bald die Universität eines Standes oder einer Stadt, bald die eines Staates, bald endlich die der Menschheit*: Cohen, *Werke* 7, 5; *Writings*, 5.

¹¹¹ Cohen, *Werke* 7, 459 f.

¹¹² Cohen, *Werke* 7, 51: *Der Religion will die ethische Kultur entgegentreten, um die Exklusivität, der diese anheimfällt, zu beseitigen. Sie ist so konsequent, auch den Einseitigkeiten der Politik zu begegnen; dennoch aber begibt sie sich außerhalb des politischen Kampfgebietes. Daher verfällt sie unrettbar dem Seitenweg einer*

The criticism is directed at the D.G.E.K., but also at the American Ethical culture Society, and at Felix Adler himself. For Felix Adler had defined the program of his New York “Society for Ethical Culture” as that of a “practical religion”¹¹³, and even if Cohen did agree with Adler’s fight against particularism, a fight he himself defined as a fight for ‘all’ human beings, he believed that such a fight cannot be led by means of a religion, whichever it is. It should be furthered politically. The dilemma is clearly formulated in the *Ethics of Pure Will*: “which of the competing powers, religion or the state, is able to provide the correct [concept of] allness [*Allheit*]¹¹⁴?” One would think that a state, being by its very nature particular, is unable to give it. But, Cohen writes, a state is better fit for the task than any religion, because it can well limit particularism, by means of international law (*Völkerrecht*) and through a federation of states (*Staatenbund*); whereas the idea of a “federation of religions [...] seems like the stuff of a satirical utopia” ...¹¹⁵ Particularism, Cohen insists, is “inherent in the concept of religion” – and “all the more dangerous because it is misrepresented as universalism. [...]”

The bitter irony with which these lines are written is telling: Cohen, in Marburg, must have had had tough discussions on that question with some of his colleagues in Marburg, more particularly with the theologian Wilhelm Herrmann (1846-1922), who was his colleague at the University. The German-Jewish historian of ideas Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) evokes them in his Introduction of 1924 to the *Jewish Writings* of Hermann Cohen¹¹⁶: Herrmann had contended that Cohen, in the *Ethics of Pure Will*, had failed to recognize the reality of religion and its independence, also from ethics; and Rosenzweig writes that the discussion with him

religiösen Sekte. Wo immer die Sittlichkeit außerhalb der Politik zum Problem gemacht wird, da ist trotz aller Feindschaft gegen die religiöse Dogmatik die Sackgasse des religiösen Konventikels unvermeidlich; Writings, 43 f.

¹¹³ Founding Address of 1876, quoted above.

¹¹⁴ Cohen, *Werke* 7, 60; *Writings*, 51.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Cohen, *Writings*, 184-241.

induced Cohen to reconsider his views and to reformulate some of his basic concepts, amongst them in the first place that of correlation. He points to Cohen's later works: *The Concept of Religion in the System of Philosophy* (1915), and the posthumous *Religion of Reason*; and he contends that Cohen, in these works, reads into the concept of correlation another meaning, namely "the mutual relation between the human being and God".¹¹⁷ A vivid discussion has developed on that thesis, and also on Cohen's attitude towards religion in his later works, in *The Concept of Religion*, and then in his posthumous *Religion of Reason*. Whether or not Cohen modified, in them, the meaning of the concept of 'correlation' and also his conception of religion, and of Judaism, is still heavily debated today.¹¹⁸ However, whichever position one adopts in that discussion, it is not contested that in the *Ethics of Pure Will* Cohen had not modified his views: in the pages devoted to a criticism of Ethical culture, he still unambiguously endorses a strictly Kantian understanding of the notion of 'correlation'.

By way of conclusion, it is nevertheless instructive to note that the position adopted by Franz Rosenzweig on one of the main topics discussed in this article – education – had actually been very close to the position endorsed on that question by Hermann Cohen. Rosenzweig never was close to the ideas defended by the D.G.E.K.: he did not defend the same conception of the state as Cohen, and certainly never supported socialism. But on the question of education, which played a fundamental role in Adler's creation of the American Ethical Culture Society¹¹⁹ and

¹¹⁷ Cohen, *Writings*, 220f.

¹¹⁸ Cf. William Kluback, Friendship without Communication. Wilhelm Herrmann and Hermann Cohen. *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, Volume 31, Issue 1, January 1986, 317–338, here 327); also Alexander Altmann, "Hermann Cohens Begriff der Korrelation" in *In Zwei Welten: Siegfried Moses zum fünfundsiebzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. Hans Tramer (Tel Aviv: Bitan Ltd., 1962), 377–99; translated as "Hermann Cohen's Concept of Correlation" (1962), in Cohen, *Writings*, 242. On Hermann Cohen's 'return home' to Judaism in later years, see also Michael Zank, „Rosenzweig und Cohen. Beobachtungen zu einer Schüler-Lehrer-Beziehung,“ in Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik ed., *Franz Rosenzweigs Neues Denken. Internationaler Kongress Kassel 2004*, vol. I: *Selbstbegrenzendes Denken in philosophos* (Freiburg/München: Karl Alber, 2006), 156-178, 169-173, 171.

¹¹⁹ Cf. for ex. Ellen Salzman-Fiske, *Secular Religion and Social Reform: Felix Adler's Educational Ideas and Programs, 1876-1933*. PhD Thesis (Columbia University, 1999).

also in the creation of the D.G.E.K., he was reputed to have spoken with one voice with Cohen: After World War One, Rosenzweig considered himself primarily as an educator¹²⁰; and he wrote two major, related articles on educational matters. The most well-known is a proposal on Jewish education, entitled “It is time” (*Zeit ist’s*).¹²¹ It calls for the creation, in Germany, of institutions of higher learning specifically dedicated to Jewish theological studies, and the project won Cohen’s warm approval.¹²² But Rosenzweig also wrote another proposal at the same time, entitled “Elementary School and Imperial School” (*Volksschule und Reichsschule*), which was supposed to serve as the foundation of the proposal on Jewish education. In that proposal, Rosenzweig strongly advocated for “the idea of the unitary national education” (*die Idee der nationalen Einheitsbildung*) for all schools.¹²³ “I may be wrong about everything in particular”, Rosenzweig wrote, “but this main point I would always continue to champion (if I could stand up for the cause personally).”¹²⁴ That to which he objected, together with Cohen, was the ‘confessionalism’ of exclusive, sectarian ‘religious’ communities – in today’s terminology, ‘communitarianism.’

¹²⁰ Letter dated 16.1.18 to Helene Sommer. In Rosenzweig, GS I.1, 505-510, here 509.

¹²¹ Rosenzweig, GS III, 461-481. Trans. as “It Is Time: Concerning Jewish Education,” in Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum Norbert Glatzer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 27–54.

¹²² Letter of 12. April 1917, Cohen, *Briefe*, ed. by Bertha and Bruno Strauss (Berlin: Schocken, 1939), 79-81.

¹²³ Rosenzweig, GS III, 371-411.

¹²⁴ Letter of 13.9. 1917 in Rosenzweig, GS I.1, 437.