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Cohen, Spinoza and the Nature of Pantheism

Abstract: Hermann Cohen's understanding of pantheism is a major factor in his critique of Spinoza. This paper examines both Spinoza's view of pantheism and Cohen's claim that pantheism is mostly a Christian doctrine, essentially opposed to the Jewish tradition. Cohen states (for example) that Spinoza "grants pantheism priority over monotheism, in the spirit of Christ." Assessing first Spinoza's writings on pantheism and then rabbinic stances on pantheism, I demonstrate that Cohen's claim that Judaism is opposed to pantheism receives little, if any, confirmation from historical reality and conclude that his analysis of Spinoza's pantheism has more to do with his negative feelings about the philosopher than with Spinoza's philosophy.

Key words: Cohen, Spinoza, pantheism, panentheism.

"This great enemy who emerged from our midst"¹

Introduction

Hermann Cohen's "Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum" (Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity) first appeared in 1915 in the *Jahrbuch für jüdische Geschichte und Literatur*. Two years before, in the winter of 1913, Cohen had taught a class and a seminar on Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. This was Cohen's first semester at the Hochschule after retiring from more than 30 years of teaching at the University of Marburg. Cohen's fame at the time was at its zenith, and his move to the Hochschule was a cause for celebration and excitement.

According to the testimony of some students who attended the TTP seminar, Cohen left no place for any expression of dissent.² The text of "Spinoza on State," which was the product of this seminar, still bears the marks of this "didactic" attitude. It is bombastic and not well argued. Thus, in one moment of emotional crescendo in the text, Cohen writes:

1 *Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Robert S. Schine (Jerusalem: Shalem, 2014) 58; Hermann Cohen, *Werke*, ed. Helmut Holzhey and Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim: Olms, 1977–) 16.371.

2 *Spinoza on State*, vii.

When Spinoza, with merciless severity, makes his own nation the object of contempt – at the time that *Rembrandt* lived on the same street and immortalized the ideal type of the Jew – no voices rises in protest against this *humanly incomprehensible* betrayal.³

Such patriotic rhetoric is quite typical of Cohen’s “Spinoza on State,” as the work reads more like a series of rants against the devil incarnate in the figure of the traitor from Amsterdam (“the demonic spirit of Spinoza”⁴) than like a sustained and serious philosophical polemic. From time to time, one can observe hints of critical arguments, but hardly any are fleshed out. The text is also replete with rudimentary factual and interpretative errors. Thus, when Cohen argues that Spinoza traces his pantheism to Jewish sources,⁵ he erroneously cites Spinoza’s reference in *Ethics* to “some of the Hebrews” (*quidam Hebraeorum*)⁶ who argued for the identity of Sekhel, Maskil and Muskal (the Intellect, the Intellecting Subject and the Intellected Object) – a Maimonidean doctrine that has nothing to do with pantheism⁷ – while the text Cohen clearly had in mind was Spinoza’s claim in Letter 73 that the traditions of the “ancient Hebrews” (*antiquis Hebraeis*) agree with Spinoza’s claim that “all things are in God.”⁸

Similarly, and on the very same page, Cohen ascribes to Spinoza the claim that “the God of the Old Testament is only a body,”⁹ a claim which is nowhere to be found in Spinoza’s works and which can be inferred from Spinoza’s text only through a patent fallacy.

One last example. Consider the following passage:

[For Spinoza] divine law is grounded in our mind. Yet this does not mean that our mind bears *responsibility* for producing and obeying the law. Instead, it means that,

3 *Spinoza on State*, 49; *Werke*, 16.360–1.

4 *Spinoza on State*, 51; *Werke*, 16.363.

5 *Spinoza on State*, 22; *Werke*, 16.320.

6 E2p7s. I refer to passages in the *Ethics* using standard abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and app(-endix); d stands for “definition” when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book, and to “demonstration” in all other cases. Hence, E2p7s is the scholium to proposition 7 of Part 2 of the *Ethics*. Unless otherwise marked, all references to Spinoza’s works are to *Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985–2016). For the Latin text of Spinoza, I rely on Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. C. Gebhardt (4 vols.; Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925) and cite this edition by volume/page/line; thus, III/23/12 stands for volume 3, page 23, line 12.

7 Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (2 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) 1.163.

8 Spinoza, *Opera*, IV/307/9–10.

9 *Spinoza on State*, 22; *Werke*, 16.321.

by definition, the human mind and God are *identical*, inasmuch as He exists in the human mind.¹⁰

Hardly any claim in this brief passage is correct. Yet what is most striking is Cohen's derivation of the identity of God and the human mind from the claim that God exists in the human mind. If I exist in North America, this obviously does not imply that I am identical to North America. What rule of inference Cohen sought to employ in this argument, and how this impressive inference of the identity of God and the human mind is supposed to square with Cohen's view of Spinoza as a pantheist – i. e., as considering the physical nature to be divine – is beyond my grasp.

I would like to concentrate here on one crucial issue: Cohen's critique of Spinoza's pantheism.¹¹ My discussion of pantheism is divided into two sections. In the first I examine Cohen's understanding of Spinoza's pantheism. In the second I briefly examine the historical validity of Cohen's claim that pantheism is a Christian doctrine, diametrically opposed to Judaism.

1. What Is Pantheism?

In order to establish a common ground, I suggest a working definition of pantheism as the view that “whatever is, is in God.” I pick this definition not only because it captures (more or less) Spinoza's view on the relation between God and the world of finite things,¹² but also in order not to pre-judge the precise manner in which finite things are in God. Some versions of pantheism would hold that finite things are parts of God. Let us call this view whole-part pantheism. Spinoza is not a whole-part pantheist, as he repeatedly stresses that God's essence is indivisible.¹³ Spinoza considers parts to be prior to their whole, both in nature and in knowledge.¹⁴ In this, Spinoza follows a long and widespread philosophical tradition which can be traced back at least to Boethius.¹⁵ Since the very first proposition of Part

¹⁰ *Spinoza on State*, 31; *Werke*, 16.334–5.

¹¹ By doing this, I will have to pass silently over a couple of surprising agreements between the two figures, such as the (false) claim that all of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible taught the same universal and simple morality. See, for example, Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (*Opera*, Ch. 13, III/168/8–17) and *Spinoza on State*, 45; *Werke*, 16.355.

¹² See E1p15: “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God.”

¹³ See E1p12 (“No attribute of a substance can be truly conceived from which it follows that the substance can be divided”), E1p13 (“A substance which is absolutely infinite is indivisible”) and E1p15s.

¹⁴ See E1p12d.

¹⁵ See Boethius, *De Divisione*, ed. J. Magee (Leiden: Brill, 1998) 879c.

One of his *Ethics* states that a substance (and thus, God) is prior to anything that is in it, it is clear that the substance cannot have parts. The whole-part relation plays an important role in Spinoza's metaphysics, but this role is restricted to the realm that Spinoza calls *Natura naturata* (E1p29s), i. e., the realm of modes. Spinoza hardly ever refers to parts of God.¹⁶ Thus, instead of claiming that finite things are parts of God, Spinoza consistently asserts that finite things (as well as some infinite things) are modes of God. Call this view substance-mode pantheism.¹⁷

Pantheism is sometimes distinguished from panentheism. I am familiar with two clear manners of drawing this distinction. According to one, pantheism asserts a symmetric dependence between God and the world of finite things (a view sometimes expressed by the formula that "the world is in God, and God is in the world"), while panentheism asserts an asymmetric dependence of the world on God.¹⁸

An alternative way to draw a distinction between pantheism and panentheism is to say that pantheism asserts an identity between God and nature – as the totality of bodies (and mental items) – while panentheism asserts that all bodies (and thoughts) are in God, yet do not exhaust God – i. e., there are some aspects or elements of God that are beyond physical (and mental) nature.¹⁹

If we consider Spinoza's view in light of these two ways of distinguishing between pantheism and panentheism, it is clear that Spinoza is a panentheist

16 The one exception is a passage in the First Dialogue of Spinoza's early work, the *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*, in which God, qua the immanent cause of creatures, is presented as the cause and the whole encompassing all creatures (*Opera*, I/30/30). In his later works, Spinoza avoids any talk about God as a whole, and as a result he reconceives the notion of immanent cause as unifying causation and inherence (instead of causation and being a whole).

17 For further discussion of the distinction between Substance-Mode Pantheism and Whole-Part Pantheism, see Y. Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 47–49.

18 Thus, the midrashic formula, "God is the place of the world, but the world is not His place" (Bereshit Rabbah, 68/9), seems to be a nice illustration of panentheism according to the first way of drawing the distinction.

19 These two criteria can be found in Gershom Scholem's discussion of pantheism in the Kabbalah ("Kabbalah," *Encyclopedia Judaica* [Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007] 11.648–9), and in various recent studies of this issue. See, for example, Christopher C. Emerick, "Pantheism and Panentheism," *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 1755–1761. A third common way to draw this distinction suggests that according to the panentheist, the world is merely part of God (or that God is larger than the world). I disregard this somewhat crude view, since it employs the terminology of parthood, while many philosophers deny that God has any parts at all.

(rather than a pantheist), according to both distinctions. He asserts: “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God.”²⁰ If we add to this his definitions of Substance²¹ and God,²² according to which God is not dependent on anything else, we get the panentheist side of the first distinction – i. e., that everything is in God and depends upon God, but not the other way around.

In order to see why Spinoza is also a panentheist according to the second distinction, we need only consider two other of his core claims. In the definition of God, he asserts that God has infinitely many attributes, yet at the beginning of Part Two of the *Ethics*, he claims that we have no causal (“we neither feel”) or cognitive (“nor perceive”) access to any of the attributes of God apart from extension and thought.²³ The infinitely many unknown divine attributes (and their modes) are just as real as the attributes of extension and thought with which we are familiar. Yet, these infinitely many attributes transcend everything we know, or even can know (Spinoza provides a careful and precise explanation for our in-principle inability to have causal or cognitive access to these attributes in Letters 64 and 66²⁴). Since what we know as “nature” – i. e., the world of bodies and minds – clearly does not exhaust Spinoza’s God, Spinoza’s views fall on the panentheist side also according to the second distinction. With these preliminary clarifications in hand, let us now turn to Cohen’s explication and evaluation of Spinoza’s pantheism.

Cohen frequently uses the term “pantheism” to refer to Spinoza’s views as a whole. Thus, on one occasion, Cohen refers to “the formalism of pantheism.”²⁵ Spinoza’s *Ethics* is indeed written *more geometrico* – that is, derived from a restricted set of definitions and axioms. I believe this is an essential and impressive feature of the book. Still, the employment of the geometrical style is completely orthogonal to the claim of pantheism – i. e., one could deny pantheism and adopt the geometrical style, and the other way around. There is nothing inconsistent in a pantheistic view which is

20 E1p15.

21 E1d3: “By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i. e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.”

22 E1d6: “By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i. e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence.”

23 E2a5: “We neither feel nor perceive any singular things (*Nagelate Schriften*, the 1677 Dutch translation of Spinoza’s works, adds “*of niets van de genatuurde natuur*” [or anything of *natura naturata*]), except bodies and modes of thinking.”

24 See Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 156–165.

25 *Spinoza on State*, 56; *Werke*, 16.368–369.

not written *more geometrico*. Thus, a bit more care in formulating his claims should make Cohen address the specific view of Spinoza he is about to criticize, rather than use the hodge-podge label “pantheism.”

More central and thus more problematic is the clear dichotomy Cohen frequently draws between (Jewish) monotheism and pantheism.²⁶ *Prima facie*, monotheism seems to be consistent with pantheism, since pantheism may well (and in Spinoza’s case clearly does²⁷) assert the existence of one unique God.²⁸ I am not saying that there cannot be an argument from the uniqueness of God to the denial of pantheism, but Cohen presents none. At the very end of “Spinoza on State,” Cohen expresses a minor reservation concerning the dichotomy between monotheism and pantheism: “[H]istory has taught us that pantheism in itself does not stand in contradiction to monotheism.”²⁹ However, he did not revise the rest of the book in light of this, and thus, at least until the last page of the work, we are led to believe that pantheism is monotheism’s enemy.

Cohen’s inept formulations in discussing Spinoza’s pantheism are not restricted to “Spinoza on State.” Even in *Religion of Reason* he argues that, from the point of view of monotheism (presumably his own point of view), “pantheism is nothing but anthropomorphism” (*Ihm ist der Pantheismus nicht anders als Anthropomorphismus*).³⁰ Why is pantheism anthropomorphic? Do we have any evidence that Spinoza thought that nature has human form? Cohen provides no explanation for his characterization of pantheism as anthropomorphic. Again, I am not saying that there cannot be an argument for charging some versions of pantheism – perhaps even one we would attribute to Spinoza – with anthropomorphism, but Cohen does not provide such an argument.

What is the reason for Cohen’s animosity toward pantheism? Apart from his deep hostility to Spinoza, the arch-pantheist of modern philosophy, it

26 See, for example, *Spinoza on State*, 48; *Werke*, 16.360: “Spinoza grants the teaching of Christ priority over Jewish monotheism. He grants pantheism priority of monotheism, in the spirit of Christ.”

27 See E1p14c1: “From this it follows that God is unique [*unicum*].”

28 We can conceive a view according to which two or more gods occupy various parts of nature so that they are jointly present in the whole of physical nature, but this is rarely, if ever, the view we have in mind when talking of pantheism. For a helpful discussion of such a view, see Warren Zev Harvey, “Judah Halevi’s Interpretation of the Tetragrammaton,” in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’an presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, ed. M. M. Bar-Asher et al. (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008) 125.

29 *Spinoza on State*, 58; *Werke*, 16.371.

30 *Religion of Reason*, 45; *Religion der Vernunft*, 52.

seems that what disturbed Cohen most about pantheism was its alleged rejection of the transcendence of God.³¹ Yet here, too, Cohen relies on a rather shallow reading of Spinoza's work. Many popular textbooks in the history of philosophy stress the "immanent" nature of Spinoza's philosophy. Yet, if one reads Spinoza's text closely, one is not able to find the vocabulary of immanence in any context but one: *immanens* appears only as a qualification of *causa*. An "immanent cause" is a cause whose effect inheres in the cause, and Spinoza proves that God is the immanent cause of all things.³² This is Spinoza's only use of the term.

Earlier I argued that Spinoza is a panentheist in both senses of the term. Recall the claim that God's infinitely many attributes apart from extension and thought are neither causally accessible nor conceivable by us. These divine attributes and their modes constitute infinitely many transcendent realms within *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature). Thus, next to his claim that all things are in God, Spinoza is also committed to the radical transcendence of almost all of God's attributes: we can neither know nor have any causal interaction with almost all of God's attributes. A philosopher of religion whose main concern is with the transcendence of God would be overwhelmed by the scope of transcendence in Spinoza. In fact, I suspect that if we put aside Maimonides' radical and bold variant of negative theology (that is, the view that God's essence is incomprehensible and can only be described by what God is not), Spinoza's system constitutes one of the more radical variants of transcendent theology.

31 Even if we grant Cohen the claim that Spinoza rejects the transcendence of God, it is not at all clear what precisely is wrong with rejecting the transcendence of God. The closest Cohen comes to presenting the beginning of a possible argument to that effect is his claim that pantheism "does not bide well with prophetic messianism" (*Spinoza on State*, 56; *Werke*, 16.368). Why precisely pantheism is inconsistent with "prophetic messianism" seems to me a mystery. Cohen must have been aware of the combination of pantheism and messianism in the writings of numerous Kabbalists. Benjamin Pollock helpfully suggested to me that Cohen was attempting to criticize Spinoza from within his own Neo-Kantian philosophical framework, which requires God's transcendence as the ground of morality. This may well be the case, but genuine philosophical polemics must begin with premises acceptable by both sides (otherwise, the argument is a mere restatement of one's own position). If Cohen had an argument to the effect that morality requires the transcendence of God, he should have stated it, and then we could weigh its value. In the absence of such an argument, we are left with his angry, patriotic rant; qua philosophy, this is not particularly impressive.

32 See E1p18d. Cf. Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 61–66.

2. Rabbinic Pantheism

Let us now examine Cohen's claims that pantheism is mostly a Christian doctrine and that it is essentially opposed to the Jewish tradition. He presents these claims in several places in "Spinoza on State." Thus, for example, he argues: "Spinoza grants the teaching of Christ priority over Jewish monotheism. He grants pantheism priority over monotheism, in the spirit of Christ."³³ In another work, he slightly moderates this claim and admits the presence of pantheism within Jewish thought:

True, Jewish philosophers, from the earliest times, have not always been impervious to the lures of pantheism; however, there were other Jewish thinkers who would remonstrate with them for posing a threat to monotheism.³⁴

Cohen does not tell the reader who were "the Jewish thinkers who would remonstrate" with the advocates of pantheism, and for a good reason. If we look at the six centuries between 1200 and 1800, we can hardly find more than three or four rabbinic critiques of pantheism. Most of these critiques were unknown to Cohen, and in all of these cases the anti-pantheist attacks ended in failure.³⁵

Rabbi Moshe Taku, an early 13th-century resident of Regensburg (Germany), was a respectable rabbinic figure and a member of the circles of the authors of the canonical Tosafot commentary on the Talmud. In *Ketav Tamim* (Wholesome Writ, a fascinating manuscript that has not yet been printed), Taku charges with heresy no less than five towering rabbinic authors, due to expressions in their writings that could be interpreted as identifying God with the universe: Saadia Gaon, Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, Avraham Ibn Ezra, Moses Maimonides and (Taku's contemporary) Yehuda the

³³ *Spinoza on State*, 48; *Werke*, 16.360. Cf. *Werke*, 16.319: "Spinoza's pantheism disposes him favorably toward the divinity of Christ, and his predisposition renders the divinity of Christ comprehensible." Obviously, pantheism "disposes one favorably" toward the divinity of every particular – Balaam's donkey and my porcupine included. However, Spinoza has little sympathy for the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, describing it as similar to the view "that a circle has assumed the nature of a square" (*Opera*, IV/309/6). On Spinoza's sardonic reading of the core myths of Christianity, see Y. Melamed, "Christus secundum spiritum: Spinoza, Jesus, and the Infinite Intellect," in *The Jewish Jesus*, ed. Neta Stahl (New York: Routledge, 2012) 140–151.

³⁴ *Reason and Hope: Selection from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, trans. Eva Jospe (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1993) 152.

³⁵ The following discussion relies on research conducted jointly with Jonathan Garb (Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

Pious.³⁶ To the best of my knowledge, this was the first and most extensive attack on pantheism within the rabbinic world. Yet it seems to have had little, if any, impact.

In medieval and early modern Kabbalah, pantheism and panentheism are commonplace. Numerous Kabbalists endorsed the formula “God is Nature” and issued unmistakable endorsements of pantheism or panentheism. Thus, the Zohar states: “He surrounds all the worlds, and nothing surrounds Him ... There is nothing outside Him; He fills all the worlds, and nothing else fills Him.”³⁷ Similarly, the 16th-century Safed Kabbalist, R. Moshe Cordovero, claims: “All is one and there is nothing separate from him ... all is included in Him and adheres to Him.”³⁸

A small-scale *Pantheismusstreit* occurred in the early 18th century, when David Nieto, the newly appointed Haham of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in London, gave a sermon in which he claimed that God and Nature are one and the same³⁹. Shortly thereafter, a group of community members accused Nieto of Spinozism. To defend and explain his views, Nieto published a Spanish theological treatise, *De La Divina Providencia O Sea Naturaleza Universal, O Natura Naturante*. In this treatise, he did not retreat from his claim, but rather argued that the very same view also appears in various midrashic and kabbalistic texts. The dispute was brought before R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi (the Hakham Tzvi), who resided at the time in Altona, next to Hamburg, and was considered as one of the leading rabbinic authorities of his generation. After weighing the views of both parties, the Hahham Tzvi ruled in favor of Nieto, arguing that Nieto’s claim was legitimate and most pious.⁴⁰

Toward the end of the 18th century, R. Elijah of Vilnius argued in a marginal note of a public letter that Hassidic pantheism amounted to an idolatrous worship “of every tree and every stone.”⁴¹ To the best of my knowledge, this is the only case in the rabbinic context where pantheism was charged as leading to or as constituting idolatry (though the charge was widespread in

36 Moshe of Taku, *Ktav Tamim*, Ms. H711, Paris facsimile ed. Joseph Dan, Jerusalem: Dinur Center, 1984) 17a–b, 27a–28b, and 52a.

37 Zohar, Pinhas, 3.449.

38 Cordovero, *Shi'ur Qoma*, 32.

39 On the Nieto affair, see Jakob J. Petuchowski, *The Theology of Haham David Nieto: An Eighteenth-Century Defense of the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Ktav, 1970) 118–122, and Melamed, “He Is the Place of the World.”

40 Ashkenazi, *Shut Hakham Tzvi*, Qu. 18, p. 14b.

41 Mordecai Wilensky, *Hassidim and Their Opponents: A Study of the Controversy between Them in the Years 1772–1815* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1970) 188.

medieval Christianity⁴²). The charge was rescinded by R. Elijah's eminent disciple, R. Hayim of Volozhin, who would himself write that one should annul himself in God, since "God fills All of this world and all of the worlds, and there is no place devoid of Him."⁴³

Conclusion

Thus, Cohen's claim that Judaism is essentially opposed to pantheism receives little, if any, confirmation from historical reality. And his analysis of Spinoza's pantheism tells us a great deal more about Cohen's mood when he was writing "Spinoza on State" than of anything else. There is a famous midrashic dictum that both extreme love and extreme hatred may make a person behave in a manner inconsistent with his or her typical behavior.⁴⁴ I would like to believe that Cohen's discussion of Spinoza might be an exemplification of this rabbinic observation – that the shortcomings of his discussion are not characteristic of his thinking as a whole.

42 See, for example, Aquinas' attack on those who conceived of God as "being in general which can be predicated of everything [*ens commune praedicabile de omnibus*]" (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 4).

43 Hayim Itzkovich, *Nefesh haTzimtzum: Rabbi Chaim Volozhin's Nefesh haChaim*, ed. and trans. Avinoam Fraenkel (2 vols.; Jerusalem and New York: Urim, 2015) 580.

44 See Bereshit Rabbah, Vayera, 55/8.