

Is ethics a logic? Sergei Rubinstein's interpretation of Hermann Cohen's ideas

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Abstract. In Sergei L. Rubinstein's article "On the Philosophical System of H. Cohen" (1918), Hermann Cohen's judgments on ethics and logic and their partly problematic relationship are considered. On the basis of historical and philosophical research into the epistemological views of Cohen I show the interaction between the ideas of Rubinstein and Neo-Kantianism. Common features of the following concepts are revealed: criticism, installation of logic, aspiration to prove philosophy a science with the help either of mathematics or the confirmation of its origin (*Ursprung*). Insofar as the problem of ethics plays a central role in his account, thanks to the inclusiveness in history, Rubinstein argues that ethics has the same objectivity as logic. The central problem of ethics both in Kant and in Cohen (and indeed in Rubinstein) lies in the nature of the person. In Rubinstein's work, the answer to the main issue of ethics opens up the world of Ideas. The Ideas and logical content of consciousness constitute the person, just as in Cohen's work ethics "generates" the person and the world. In this regard Rubinstein believed that Cohen had adopted a distinctive feature of the interpretation of ethics and freedom from Kant. Before presenting this background, an attempt is made to update the historical and philosophical value of the ideas of Rubinstein, clarifying the essence of the objects of ethics and logic.

Keywords: Sergei Rubinstein, Hermann Cohen, Neo-Kantianism, logic, ethics

1 Introduction

This article examines the problem of knowledge and its connection with ethics and logic in the essay "On the Philosophical System of Hermann Cohen", written around 1918 by the Russian philosopher and psychologist Sergei L. Rubinstein (1889–1960). Apparently, this work on Cohen was written by Rubinstein in connection with the death of Hermann Cohen in April 1918, as Olga N. Bredikhina (1994, pp. 228-230) emphasized in her article, when she oversaw the publication of this work. One of the important questions in the theory of knowledge in Cohen's philosophical system according to Rubinstein is the question of

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consciousness and the connection of consciousness as its factor with logic. Rubinstein (1994, p. 246) wrote: “Ethics is united with Logic by the commonality of a systematic concept and by the unity of methodological construction. But Ethics is separated from Logic and established as an independent discipline in relation to Logic by the independence of its object and the irreducibility of its issues to the issue of Logic.” In addition to the fact that ethics is engaged in the normalization of human relations, its main problem is the person in his/her history, and thus, precisely owing to the inclusion of the person in history, the ethical has the same objectivity as the logical.

Here Rubinstein points to Cohen’s book *Ethics of Pure Will*, in which Cohen actually came to the conclusion, as Rubinstein (1994, p. 247) wrote, that the ethical “can show itself and, by the objectivity of its content, justify itself as being of common obligatory significance”. Since the central problem of ethics, both in Kant and in Cohen and similarly in Rubinstein, is the human being, ethics reveals the world of ideas, i.e. exactly the ideological content by which the human being is constituted. In Cohen, ethics “gives rise” to a person. Obviously, therefore, ethics refuses to be only a norm-giving discipline – it becomes an operational technique in which technologies for “working” with the world must be developed. And therefore, as a philosophical discipline about the person in relation to the human problem, ethics can be considered as the practical logic of the sciences (in Kant’s sense the sciences of cognition and the selflessness in cognition). Rubinstein (1994, p. 249) here emphasised the distinctive feature of Cohen’s interpretation of ethics and freedom in comparison with Kant’s, in that “the ethical content of the law is the ethical content of the subject; by and in it the subject (*Selbst*) is determined and constituted”. Therefore, an ethical subject is a subject of action and can therefore be thought of as a task, and not only as a source of action. Therefore, an ethical subject does not have a given as a “pre-payment” in his ethical acts, and therefore a person as an ethical subject does not exist at all until he manifests himself in these acts and in his behavior; he appears in them and through them arises and is generated, becomes a person, as Rubinstein wrote.¹ That is why the ethical is an endless task, a task of the future, a kind of project of the future, in which ethics is only a kind of plan, a kind of projection from the present, where the concept of the time of this project develops logic.

2 Rubinstein on the similarity of Cohen’s and Schuppe’s concepts of origin and its reception in Helmut Holzhey

Rubinstein, in the work on Cohen under consideration, emphasized that the philosophical systems of German idealism in 1860–1870 seemed already to be giving way to materialistic concepts, and then to a psychological moment. Therefore, “Cohen’s first philosophical task and work was to restore the Kant system, the basis and source of all subsequent systems of German idealism” (Rubinstein, 1994, p. 234). And so Cohen laid down at the basis of his logic of pure cognition as the logic of initial cognition “the principle of the basic-beginning *Ursprung* (origin): thought cannot be given anything, thought itself gives rise to all its content, the content of being” (*ibid.*). But if even thoughts can be given nothing, then where can this very generation begin? Rubinstein here simply points to Cohen’s works on Kant and concludes that thought itself gives rise to all its content. Similar ideas were expressed by a German philosopher Wilhelm Schuppe (1836–1913), a representative of immanent philosophy (Shevtsov, 2018, pp. 171-173). Presented in immanent philosophy and in postulates of a “thesis of immanence” Schuppe (1910, pp. 4-6), in the doctrine concerning the theory of knowledge and logic, dialectics of the subject and the object, coincides partly

¹ The most recent study about this topic see in Dmitrieva (2021).

with Adolf Trendelenburg in his generating logic, partly with Cohen, as was shown by Rubinstein (*cf.* Shevtsov, 2018, pp. 172-173).

However, the paradox is the question how something can come from something that does not exist at all? In order for something certain to arise it is necessary for something certain to exist. Rubinstein conveys Cohen's paradoxical conclusions. These conclusions, as Rubinstein wrote, "still grew out of the inherent logic of thought with natural necessity, due to that logic" (Rubinstein, 1994, p. 235). Do they come from Kant's system or from "the inherent logic of thought", i.e. do they naturally come from the very specificity of thought, from thought itself? Knowledge itself implies in its meaning a certain identity of being and thoughts about this being. This state occurs when "some content of being becomes the content of thought" (*ibid.*). So the content of thought will be equal to the content of reality. But this is at first glance impossible. Or, more precisely, it becomes possible only if any content does not exist or is a copy of the first already existing one. Naturally, the mind allows the existence of reality to be primary, while the content of the thought naturally becomes secondary. This means that "in order for the content of thought to be knowledge", i.e. compared with the content of reality, "it is necessary and sufficient that it includes its own content in the content of the subject of which it serves as a definition" (*ibid.*). This key moment, noticed by Rubinstein in Cohen, had as its subject an attempt to describe philosophically the subject of the concept of "thought". This property is the quality of thought itself, to be generating cognition. But the immanence of logic may be inherent in the idea of reality itself, but not be an inherent thought and reality as a given of its content in thought. Obviously, to understand what we see, takes time, i.e. some lag occurs, because otherwise we would have to simultaneously perceive not only the rose at a distance of ten meters, but also its smell (but we have not yet perceived this smell – our consciousness takes it, extracts from memory how a rose should smell), but if the wind blows from the side of the rose or if we approach, then our consciousness will make sure that we perceive the rose entirely and completely.

However, Rubinstein translated Cohen's term *Ursprung* as a principle and thought that then, as a concept, it was a production factor. Rubinstein cites here in Russian the following passage from Cohen's *Logic of Pure Cognition*: "The production itself is the product, the activity itself is the content". Other excerpts from Cohen's work confirm this: "Thinking cannot have an origin outside itself" (Cohen, 1902, p. 12) and, further, "thinking is thinking of the origin; nothing can be given in the origin" (*ibid.*, p. 33).

I believe that one can consider, as the German philosopher Helmut Holzhey recently did, that perception determines the logic of pure cognition through pure thinking in correlation to this requirement as an occurrence, "*Ursprung*". Holzhey rightly emphasized that at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely in the 1920s, philosophy was an experience of political and cultural awareness of the time. Holzhey (2002, p. 26) calls the source of psychological analysis in the human spirit an action whose roots are in nature and therefore the analysis of this concerns the psychological mechanism. And so, I came to the conclusion that the concept of ethics as logic is a generating discipline (i.e. as Rubinstein presented it), but in Holzhey's analysis, the logic of pure cognition becomes a kind of repetition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Cohen himself seeks to achieve a certain de-ontologization of the philosophical concept of science and knowledge (*ibid.*, p. 32). Holzhey speaks of the concept of a "logical motive" in logic, and this Cohen correlated with logic and ethics (*ibid.*, p. 38). Therefore, I believe that Holzhey drew a conclusion about the logic of Cohen's ethics that "[t]he method of forming differentials (*infinitesimal method*), whose invention and application to solve mathematical and physical problems Cohen historically sufficiently demonstrates, becomes a paradigm for the efficiency of thinking in the process of object recognition; indeed, it appears to him as the decisive means of thinking of recent natural science" (*ibid.*, p. 29).

3 Parmenides' thesis of the identity of 'thought and what it thinks about' and its interpretation in Russian philosophy and by Cohen according to Rubinstein

The Russian philosopher Valentin F. Asmus (2005, p. 20) claims that “in fact, Parmenides' thesis was an expression of the thought that it is inadmissible to think of the existence of non-existence. Non-existence does not exist and cannot even be thought of. Even when we try to think of non-existence, it exists, at least as an object of thought”. Another Russian philosopher, Gennady G. Mayorov (2009, p. 191), rightly noted that “Parmenides' One is still Nature, although taken only in its intelligible aspect”. I believe that Mayorov very accurately described Parmenides' decision on the idea of true being, namely, “in the form of a strong disjunction: either being or non-being is true, and the third is not given” (*ibid.*, p. 106).

The nineteenth century Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov was right when he saw the most important sign for any existence in the identity of its truth. So, if we recognise that there is a single One, seeing it everywhere and in everything, and consider this statement true, then in no case can we change it (this situation in ourselves). Solovyov (1993, p. 225) believed that the Eleatics did this and they immediately fell into contradiction: “For the reality of the multitude cannot be eliminated by mere negation. The multitude is also existent. In such a case one has only to separate the realm of multiple phenomena, as being untrue, from the realm of a single being, as true truth, which Parmenides did.”

Therefore, Parmenides distinguished himself in his doctrine of truth, where he claimed a single being, but also in his other concept, namely in the concept of “opinion”, he claimed a “many”, and as Solovyov rightly believed, Parmenides tried not to mix them, otherwise there would be a contradiction. Indeed, if a single being is true and much is untrue, and it is achievable as opinions, then this means that the world of phenomena is untrue. Therefore I believe with Solovyov that on the example of the analysis of this passage from Parmenides, the essence of the process of philosophizing and her task was shown: uniform comprises a “many” and “[t]his unity is not negative or abstract, excluding all multiplicity, but positive, i.e. comprising all multiplicity; [...] i.e., in other words, it must be recognized that it is not an abstract being, but a concrete or whole being” (Solovyev, 1993, p. 226). On the example of the philosophical discourse of Parmenides and in the *Parmenides* of Plato, on the subject of distinguishing and detecting the boundaries of terms, I believe the technique of philosophy and the formation of philosophical concepts are traced.

However, here a slight discrepancy is found between the statements of Cohen about Parmenides fragment 8, 34 given above by Rubinstein, which leads to an interesting statement: “the principle of the primordial origin (*Ursprung*): nothing can be given to thought, thought itself generates all its content, the content of being” (Rubinstein, 1994, p. 234), but Parmenides, on whose fragment Cohen relied, says that the idea itself, and what arises – are already identical, i.e. the thought does not give rise to its subject. Therefore, the idea of the subject and the subject itself exist in proximity, identical and simultaneously, but independently. The thought of the subject and the subject of thought itself exist independently of each other, but are identical to each other. Thus, thought occurs (arises) next to the subject, with the thing, but independently, but nevertheless, the thought of the subject and the subject of thought itself are identical. From this we can conclude that the fragments of Rubinstein on the fragment of Cohen, which refers to the fragment of Parmenides – this chain of interpretations of the relation of thought to the subject indicates the similarity of these interpretations over time and their differences, and this allows us to follow the modification of concepts over time. If Rubinstein agreed with Cohen in understanding *Ursprung* as the basis-beginning, and that in thought nothing is given, and that thought itself gives rise to all its content as being in the sense of Parmenides, on whom both Cohen and Rubinstein relied,

it turns out that thought, after all, is identical to the subject, but they, the subject and the thought of the subject, exist independently of each other, although in proximity.

Rubinstein further draws attention to the fact that Cohen interpreted the concept as a concept that gives rise to this being as a factor, and called it *Ursprung*, but it also translates as a principle. From this Rubinstein (1994, p. 236) concluded that cognition as a principle is more precisely a concept, and emphasises that this is a process of objectification of thought in its own logical content, and this completely, without residue. Thus, an objective reality is created before us, which exists as if “outside of us” and from here, when we form a thought i.e. consider something, then we consider it as if outside its objectivity; but taken in the objectivity of its existence, it turns out to be taken “in the objectivity of its logical or ideational content, so that logical thought should be cognition” (*ibid.*, p. 237). Following Cohen, Rubinstein confirms that the logic of thought is the logic of cognition, thought as knowledge is the thought of being, therefore the logic of cognition is ontology. But logic “takes being not isolated from thought” (*ibid.*), therefore it is not ontology, but logic. Since each type of cognition has in its objectivity (its content) the form of a general obligatory position, i.e. a kind of ethos, each type of cognition has both logic and ethics in itself, as a norm and technique for determining the boundaries of logical cognition. Ethics becomes for logic a technique and filter for filling the contents of cognition. This should help to avoid the “dualistic abyss between the kingdom of ideas and a concrete being”, which Rubinstein so feared in this study on Cohen, and is “at the same time both mental and objective, both in relation of thought to the being which it constitutes and in relation of thought to its content” (*ibid.*).

But this is achieved only where they come from a scientific design, and not from the unconscious, unconscious and artistic. This is done in logic, in the constructions of which there is an inextricable connection with science, Rubinstein (1994, p. 245) agreed with these provisions of Cohen, but this connection with science for Cohen is “above all, the connection with mathematics and mathematical natural science as the most precise and accurate formulation of the main problem of logic”. However, this requirement for the connection and unity of logic and science, emanating from the method of cognition, does not come down only to a strictly formalised apparatus of logic and, in a broad sense, to its application to applied scientific cognitive techniques. Rubinstein here drew attention to the very important conclusion of Cohen that in order to be cognition, the thought “must be a continuous system” (*ibid.*, p. 246). Therefore, parts of this continuous system must be arranged by the logic of cognition, logical laws, ethically adjusted to each other, i.e. ethically normalised (to ensure precisely this continuity), which ultimately gives a complete theory. According to Sergei Rubinstein, in the philosophical system of Hermann Cohen and in particular in his *Ethics of Pure Will*, the dialectical interaction of ethics and logic is shown: they unite owing to the commonality of a systematic concept and the unity of methodological construction, and are disconnected owing to the independence of their own object and the irremediability of their problem to the problem of logic and the problem of ethics, according to Rubinstein, is the person in his history. This view can be agreed upon only partially, logic being not only constitutive of the existence of nature: it acquires its structure not from ancient Greek natural philosophers, but from Aristotle, from whom it was developed along with ethics, rhetoric and grammar. Therefore, logic, as a characteristic discipline of the human mind, comes closer to ethics in that logic is, as it were, an applied ethic of thinking, and ethics, in turn, is also made the applied science of presentation, more precisely, the technique of working out logical skills and communication competencies. This is expressed in the human in his ingenuity as an engineering property and the installation of the human mind on the discovery of the new as his main concern and task. Cohen also wrote about this in his *Ethics of Pure Will*. Rubinstein (1994, p. 337) also relied on this passage in *The Ethics of Pure Will*. Thus, having analyzed Rubinstein’s work, and for this by simultaneously studying certain aspects of Parmenides’

teachings and concepts about him, i.e. about Parmenides and the study of his philosophy (Shevtsov, 2017, p. 84), I have come to the conclusion that logic and ethics are united by analogy to the unity between the single being of Parmenides, Cohen and Rubinstein, and the multifarious being, as truth in things.

4 Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of the concept of Hermann Cohen presented by Sergei Rubinstein, at least in its individual aspects, which, as logic and ethics in particular, show us that philosophy today, as in the days of Parmenides, Anaximander and Thales, must now and always begin its study with basic foundations, with natural philosophy. The modern world has become almost completely different before our eyes. Therefore, to describe our world accurately, we need to start again with a new natural philosophy. After all, otherwise we are in some “continued” past, which began almost 2700 years ago, ancient Greek atomists. Therefore, today, cognitive courage and general courage are again becoming relevant, as the greatest philosopher Immanuel Kant called for at one time, and as Roger Penrose, the Nobel laureate in physics 2020, demonstrated in his works on modern natural philosophy and now again natural philosophy, so created, will be based on the solid ground of physics and astronomy. Thus, the identification of ethics and logic in this construction of a new natural philosophy today acts as an engineering solution.

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