

# Hermann Cohen

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**Hermann Cohen** (4 July 1842 – 4 April 1918) was a German Jewish philosopher, one of the founders of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism, and he is often held to be "probably the most important Jewish philosopher of the nineteenth century".<sup>[2]</sup>

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## Life

Cohen was born in Coswig, Anhalt. He early began to study philosophy, and soon became known as a profound student of Kant. He was educated at the Gymnasium at Dessau, at the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, and at the universities of Breslau, Berlin, and Halle. In 1873, he became *Privatdozent* in the philosophical faculty of the University of Marburg, the thesis with which he obtained the *venia legendi* being *Die systematischen Begriffe in Kant's vorkritischen Schriften nach ihrem Verhältniss zum kritischen Idealismus*. Cohen was elected Professor extraordinarius at Marburg in 1875, and Professor ordinarius in the following year (see: "Academic ranks in Germany").

He was one of the founders of the "Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judenthums", which held its first meeting in Berlin in November 1902.

Cohen edited and published Friedrich Albert Lange's final philosophical work (*Logische Studien*, Leipzig, 1877). Cohen edited and wrote several versions of a long introduction and critical supplement to Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus*.<sup>[3]</sup>

He devoted three early volumes to the interpretation of Kant (Kant's Theory of Experience, Kant's Foundations of Ethics, and Kant's Foundations of Aesthetics), in 1902 he began publishing the three eminent volumes of his own systematic philosophy: *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (1902), *Ethik des reinen Willens* (1904) and *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (1912). The planned fourth volume on psychology was never written.

His writings relating more especially to Judaism include several pamphlets, among them "Die

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Hermann Cohen by Karl Doerbecker

<b>Born</b>	4 July 1842 Coswig, Anhalt, Germany
<b>Died</b>	4 April 1918 (aged 75) Berlin, Germany <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Nationality</b>	German
<b>Alma mater</b>	Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau University of Breslau Humboldt University of Berlin University of Halle-Wittenberg
<b>Doctoral students</b>	Ernst Cassirer, Paul Natorp, Hans Kelsen

Kulturgeschichtliche Bedeutung des Sabbat," 1881; "Ein Bekenntniss in der Judenfrage," Berlin, 1880; as well as the following articles: "Das Problem der Jüdischen Sittenlehre," in the "Monatsschrift," xliii. (1899), pp. 385–400, 433–449; "Liebe und Gerechtigkeit in den Begriffen Gott und Mensch." in "Jahrbuch für Jüdische Geschichte und Litteratur," III. (1900), pp. 75–132; "Autonomie und Freiheit," in the "Gedenkbuch für David Kaufmann," 1900.

Cohen's most famous Jewish works include: *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (*Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, 1919),<sup>[4]</sup> *Deutschtum und Judentum*, *Die Naechstenliebe im Talmud*, and *Die Ethik des Maimonides*. His essay "Die Nächstenliebe im Talmud" was written at the request of the Marburg Königliches Landgericht (3d ed., Marburg, 1888). Cohen's Jewish writings are collected in his "Jüdische Schriften" (3 vols. ed. Bruno Strauss, Berlin 1924). There is an ongoing new academic edition of Cohen's works, edited by Helmut Holzhey, Hartwig Wiedebach u.a. (Olms, Hildesheim 1977 ff.) An English translation of some of his Jewish writings is available in *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, translated by Eva Jospe, NY 1971.



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Cohen was outspokenly opposed to Zionism and its aspiration to create a Jewish state and thus "return the Jews to History". In his view, Judaism was inherently a-historical, with a spiritual and moral mission far transcending the nationalist aims of Zionism.

Despite the above attitude to Zionism, Tel Aviv has a Hermann Cohen Street.

Cohen is buried at the Weißensee Cemetery in Berlin.

## Works

- "Die Platonische Ideenlehre Psychologisch Entwickelt," in "Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie," 1866, iv. 9 ("Platonic Ideal Theorie Psychologically Developed")
- "Mythologische Vorstellungen von Gott und Seele," ib. 1869 ("Mythological Concepts of God and the Soul")
- "Die dichterische Phantasie und der Mechanismus des Bewusstseins," ib. 1869 ("Poetic Fantasy and Mechanisms of Consciousness")
- "Zur Kontroverse zwischen Trendelenburg und Kuno Fischer," ib. 1871 ("On the controversy between Trendelenburg and Kuno Fischer")
- *Kant's Theorie der Erfahrung*, Berlin, 1871; 2d ed., 1885 ("Kant's Theory of Experience").
  - [One central chapter of the 1885 edition is translated as 2015, "The Synthetic Principles," D. Hyder (trans.), in S. Luft (ed.), *The Neo-Kantian Reader*, Oxford: Routledge.]
- *Kant's Begründung der Ethik*, Berlin, 1877 ("Kant's Foundations of Ethics")
- "Platon's Ideenlehre und die Mathematik," Marburg, 1878 ("Mathematics and Theory of Platonic Ideals")
- *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimalmethode und seine Geschichte: ein Kapitel zur Grundlegung der Erkenntniskritik*, Berlin, 1883 ("The Principle of the Method of Infinitesimals and its History: A Chapter Contributed to Critical Perception") [A short selection is translated as 2015, "Introduction," D. Hyder and L. Patton (trans.), in S. Luft (ed.), *The Neo-Kantian Reader*, Oxford: Routledge.]
- "Von Kant's Einfluss auf die Deutsche Kultur," Berlin, 1883 ("On Kant's Influence on German Culture")

- *Kant's Begründung der Aesthetik*, Berlin, 1889 ("Kant's Foundations of Aesthetics")
- "Zur Orientierung in den Losen Blättern aus Kant's Nachlass," in "Philosophische Monatshefte," 1890, xx. ("An Orientation to the Loose Pages from Kant's Literary Estate")
- "Leopold Schmidt," in "Neue Jahrbücher für Philologie und Pädagogik," 1896, cliv.

## Notes

1. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy "Hermann Cohen" (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cohen/>)
2. Jewish Virtual Library, *Hermann Cohen* (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/biography/HermannCohen.html>)
3. Second enlarged edition based on the 7th edition of the original, 1902, v I.
4. *Metzler Philosophical Lexikon*, article on Hermann Cohen

## Further reading

- Reiner Munk, *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005. ISBN 978-1-4020-4046-7.
- Irene Abigail Piccinini, *Una guida fedele. L'influenza di Hermann Cohen sul pensiero di Leo Strauss*. Torino: Trauben, 2007. ISBN 978-88-89909-31-7.
- Bienenstock, Myriam *Cohen face à Rosenzweig. Débat sur la pensée allemande* (Paris, Vrin, 2009)
- *Hermann Cohen: l'idéalisme critique aux prises avec le matérialisme* (special issue of the journal *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, ISSN 0035-1571), edited by Myriam Bienenstock, Paris, PUF, 2011, 141 pages.
- Liisa Steinby, "Hermann Cohen and Bakhtin's early aesthetics," *Studies in East European Thought*, 63,3 (2011), 227–249.
- George Y. Kohler, "Finding God's Purpose - Hermann Cohen's Use of Maimonides to Establish the Authority of Mosaic Law", in: *Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 18:1 (2010), p. 85–115.
- Stéphane Moses (ed. et al.) *Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion*; International Conference in Jerusalem 1996, Hildesheim 1997.
- Steven Schwarzschild "Franz Rosenzweig's Anecdotes about Hermann Cohen", in: *Gegenwart im Rückblick: Festgabe für die Jüdische Gemeinde zu Berlin 25 Jahre nach dem Neubeginn*, ed. H. A. Strauss and K. R. Grossman, Heidelberg, 1970, S. 209–218.
- Steven Schwarzschild "The Democratic Socialism of Hermann Cohen", *HUCA* 27 (1956).
- Steven Schwarzschild "Germanism and Judaism - Hermann Cohen's Normative Paradigm of the German-Jewish Symbiosis", in: *Jews and Germans from 1860 to 1933*, ed. David Bronsen, Heidelberg 1979.
- Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, Albany 1997.
- Andrea Poma "Hermann Cohen: Judaism and Critical Idealism", in: Michael L. Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, Cambridge 2007.
- Michael Zank *The Idea of Atonement in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, Providence 2000.
- Almuth Bruckstein, *Cohen's Ethics of Maimonides*, translated with commentary, Madison, Wisc. 2004.
- Lawrence Kaplan, "Hermann Cohen's Theory of Sacrifice", in: "Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums"; *Tradition und Ursprungsdenken in Hermann Cohens Spätwerk*; (ed. Helmut Holzhey et al.), Hildesheim 2000.

## External links

- Hermann-Cohen-Gesellschaft ([https://web.archive.org/web/20060319084816/http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File\\_ID=306](https://web.archive.org/web/20060319084816/http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=306)), promotes research on Hermann Cohen's work and help

bring his philosophy to bear in the forum of current debate.

- Hermann Cohen Archives at the University of Zurich, Switzerland (<http://www.philosophie.uzh.ch/bibliothek/recherche/hca.html>)
- The Hermann Cohen Society of North America ([https://web.archive.org/web/20060319084816/http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File\\_ID=306](https://web.archive.org/web/20060319084816/http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=306))
- Edgar, Scott. "Hermann Cohen" (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cohen/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Hermann Cohen (<https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=6791529>) at Find a Grave
- Hermann Cohen, Systematizer of Ethical Monotheism ([https://web.archive.org/web/20060319084816/http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File\\_ID=306](https://web.archive.org/web/20060319084816/http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=306)) at the Wayback Machine (archived March 19, 2006), JewishGates



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Categories: 1842 births | 1918 deaths | People from Coswig, Anhalt | German Jewish theologians | German philosophers | Jewish philosophers | Kantian philosophers | Philosophers of Judaism | German socialists | Jewish socialists | Jewish anti-Zionism in Germany | University of Marburg faculty

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