

The Metaphysics of Morris R. Cohen: From Realism to Objective Relativism

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A tragic aura attaches to the figure of Morris Raphael Cohen. He seems a thinker without a legacy. An American philosopher between the World Wars well known for his philosophies of history and law, Cohen aspired to metaphysical system-building in the grand style, rooted in his study of logic and scientific method. But the rise of logical positivism brushed aside his philosophy. Eventually even his students failed to acknowledge their intellectual debt. Nevertheless, I will argue that Cohen charted certain consequences of early twentieth-century American realism more fully than anyone else, that in his work we find the roots of “objective relativism,” a view the Columbia naturalists adopted, and that he is the source of those ideas in their work, cited or not. Cohen did have a systematic philosophical legacy.

A malnourished child from Minsk, arrived in New York City in 1892 at age twelve, Cohen earned a Harvard Ph.D. in philosophy and a professorship at the College of the City of New York; he also taught as a visiting professor at several other major American universities, including the University of Chicago (1938–41). He wrote for *The New Republic* and was a founder of the Conference on Jewish Relations. His work in the philosophy of history and of law was influential: he was a founding editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*; Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. had his papers bound for easy reference.¹

¹ See David A. Hollinger, *Morris R. Cohen and the Scientific Ideal* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1975), xiii, and Felix Cohen, “The Holmes–Cohen Correspondence,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9, no. 91 (January 1948): 3–52. My thanks to Professor Hollinger

He served as president of the Eastern American Philosophical Association (APA) in 1929–30. Cohen was the first Russian Jew to become a prominent American thinker, and one of the first Jews to occupy a regular philosophy teaching position.²

Cohen played a unique role in the development of twentieth-century American philosophy. From 1912 to 1938 virtually all Jewish philosophers from New York City passed through his classroom at City College, including Justus Buchler, Lewis Feuer, Albert Hofstadter, Sidney Hook, Milton Munitz, Ernest Nagel, Joseph Ratner, Herbert Schneider, Paul Weiss, Morton White, and Philip Wiener. His students taught at many colleges along the Cambridge–New Haven–New York corridor. At Yale, Weiss would found the *Review of Metaphysics* (1947) and the Metaphysical Society of America (1950). Schneider, Nagel, Ratner, Buchler, and Hofstadter taught at Columbia. Thus, as positivism and linguistic philosophy came to dominate American philosophy after World War II, two of the departments that remained strongholds of earlier American thought bore the “mark of Cohen,” as his students used to say. In 1923 Cohen became the first philosopher to collect the writings of Charles Peirce into digestible form.³ For fifty years nearly all collections of Peirce were by Cohen or his students Weiss, Buchler, and Wiener.⁴

for his helpful guidance. For Cohen’s philosophy of law, politics, and history, see *Law and the Social Order: Essays in Legal Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, 1933), *The Faith of a Liberal: Selected Essays* (New York: Holt, 1946), and *The Meaning of History* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1947). See also Cohen, *A Dreamer’s Journey: The Autobiography of Morris Raphael R. Cohen* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949) and *Reflections of a Wondering Jew* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950); Leonora Cohen Rosenfield, *Portrait of a Philosopher: Morris R. Cohen in Life and Letters* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962); Cornelius Delaney, *Mind and Nature: A Study of the Naturalistic Philosophies of Cohen, Woodbridge and Sellars* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969) and “Morris Raphael Cohen,” *The Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*, vol. 1, ed. John Shook (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Continuum), 516–18; and Susanne Klingenstein, *Jews in the American Academy, 1900–1940: The Dynamics of Intellectual Assimilation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

² Klingenstein, *Jews in the American Academy*.

³ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Chance, Love, and Logic: Philosophical Essays by the Late Charles S. Peirce, the Founder of Pragmatism*, ed. Cohen (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1923).

⁴ The only exceptions were Charles Hartshorne, Weiss’s co-editor; Arthur Burks, editor of the final two volumes of the *Collected Papers*; and Vincent Tomas, who edited Peirce’s *Essays in the Philosophy of Science* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957). See *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 6 vols., ed. Hartshorne and Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931–35), and vols. 7–8, ed. Burks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958); *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1940); and *Values in a Universe of Chance: Selected Writings of Charles S. Peirce, 1839–1914*, ed. Philip Wiener (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

But Cohen was rarely happy. He was a difficult man.⁵ He forever knocked on doors that were not open to him, especially a position in a doctorate-granting program. That meant, above all, Columbia. Cohen took courses there, knew the faculty, and occasionally taught there. He frequently published in Columbia's *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* (JPPSM, later *The Journal of Philosophy*). The most famous collective expression of Columbia's philosophical naturalism, *Naturalism and the Human Spirit* (1944), edited by Yervant Krikorian, was dedicated to Cohen.⁶ But he could never enter the manor. Cohen was insufficiently genteel, or gentile. According to Dewey, he was kept out of the philosophy department by chairman F. J. E. Woodbridge "perhaps for social reasons more than any others."⁷ Doubtless Cohen's attitude did not help. In a 1909 APA lecture, he used Woodbridge, Dewey, and the department journal—in which the paper was published!—as exemplars of the wrong approach to philosophy.⁸ Dewey would wryly note Cohen's "undue fear lest somebody else agree with him."⁹ He seems the classic example of a man unwilling to join any club that would have him as a member. He was, in his own words, a "stray dog among the philosophers," unwelcome in "any metaphysical kennel," unable to get the "out-of-door mud" off his feet.¹⁰

There was another disappointment. For Cohen the philosopher's task was to provide "a working view of the universe and man's place in it."¹¹ But his mind was not built for building. He claimed to have hundreds of pages on metaphysics waiting to be synthesized, but there is no evidence of it.¹² In 1940 at Chicago, facing the battle of positivists versus older metaphysicians, he wrote, "The book on metaphysics . . . would equally irritate . . . the naturalists [i.e., positivists] and the metaphysicians. I thought of calling it by the paradoxical title 'Naturalistic Metaphysics' . . . [but] the prospect of . . . completing [it] seems ever more remote."¹³ A stroke in

⁵ Sidney Hook, "Morris R. Cohen—Fifty Years Later," *American Scholar*, June 1, 1976: 426–36.

⁶ Yervant Krikorian, *Naturalism and the Human Spirit* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

⁷ Hook reports Dewey's remark in his "Morris R. Cohen—Fifty Years Later," 43.

⁸ Morris R. Cohen, "The Conception of Philosophy in Recent Discussion," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 7, no. 15 (1910): 401–10 (hereafter cited as JPPSM). See also Cohen's *Studies in Philosophy and Science* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1949).

⁹ Hollinger, *Morris R. Cohen*, 89.

¹⁰ Cohen, *A Dreamer's Journey*, 174.

¹¹ Cohen, "Conception of Philosophy," 405.

¹² Delaney, *Mind and Nature*, 76n75.

¹³ Cohen, *A Dreamer's Journey*, 195.

January 1942 rendered him incapable of serious work. In January 1947 he died, an annoying man revered for his devotion to critical inquiry but never embraced as a constructive thinker. His student Morton White would later conclude that Cohen “had no original positive philosophical doctrine to impart.”¹⁴

In fact he did. One indication comes from Nagel. In 1947 Nagel described what he thought was “beyond question America’s most significant contribution to philosophical intelligence.”¹⁵ It was *not* pragmatism. He alternately named it “objective relativism, functional realism, contextual naturalism, and process philosophy.” It accepts, first, “the essentially incomplete but fundamentally plural character of existence” in which contingency and qualitative discontinuities are “ultimate.” Second, “every quality and event is a genuine occurrence in some . . . process or context,” but “no one context . . . is relevant to the occurrence of everything,” so “there is no absolutely privileged context.” Third, it is anti-reductionist, holding that “the world contains at least as many qualitatively distinct features as are disclosed in human experience.” The human “is as much an integral part of nature . . . as is any of [nature’s] other sectors.”¹⁶

What Nagel did not say was that the first philosopher to promote this view was his teacher, Morris Cohen. The pilgrim was never able to make the farm a going concern. That was left for others. Still, he was the first to survey the territory.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY REALISM

The context of Cohen’s thought was the movement that called itself *realism*, an international North Atlantic exchange that arguably initiated twentieth-century philosophy.¹⁷ While realism reputedly arose as a reaction against German, English, and American idealism, its complexities have to be understood as responding to modern thought as a whole—in Lovejoy’s terms, a “Revolt of the Twentieth Century against the Seventeenth.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Morton White, *A Philosopher’s Story* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 21.

¹⁵ Ernest Nagel, “Philosophy and the American Temper,” in *Sovereign Reason and Other Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1954), 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 54–56.

¹⁷ See John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (New York: Penguin, 1957).

¹⁸ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Revolt Against Dualism: An Inquiry Concerning the Existence of Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1930), 1.

Hence John Herman Randall's description of the time: "Modern philosophy, thank God, is at last over."¹⁹

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century had been, for philosophy, a revolution in physics. The physics was mechanistic: phenomena are the effects of the motions of material particles operating under laws of force relating momentum and distance. Mechanism had to be made compatible with the Christian doctrine of the soul, and rendered independent of the moral-spiritual arena, so that scientific progress would not entail ongoing spiritual, hence institutional, change. The mind-matter dualism of Descartes, which Locke adopted and Spinoza adapted, accomplished that with brilliant simplicity. The doctrine of representationalism—that we experience not independent existences but representations caused by the former—and the distinction between objective primary qualities (e.g., mass, momentum, volume, shape) and subjective secondary qualities (color, sound, taste, smell) are inevitable results of confronting a mechanistic physics with a personal consciousness doubling as an immortal soul. Perception and cognition of independent realities thereby became a problem.

The inability of dualism to account for the interaction of mental and physical events—hence cognition, agency, and biology itself—led those wary of materialism to idealism, the claim that reality must ultimately be dependent on mental acts. If matter and mind remain the only options, and all knowledge makes implicit reference to mind, matter seemed expendable. German idealism was in this context essentially a process idealism, fit for a historicist and evolutionary century. It spread across American philosophy in the last three decades of the century (especially the work of the Germans F. A. Trendelenburg and Hermann Lotze).²⁰

But the years 1859–1905 brought four scientific revolts that eventually had a cumulative effect: Darwin's *Origin of Species* meant mind must have evolved from biological forms that lacked it; the new mathematical logicians, such as Peirce, Gottlob Frege, and Bertrand Russell, believed the objects of logic and mathematics were real and independent of mind; Einstein demonstrated that space-time measurements are objectively relative; and Wilhelm Wundt's experimental psychology, Russell noted, made mind more like matter, just as Einstein's physics was making matter more like mind.²¹ These revolts put pressure on mechanism, dualism, and idealism.

¹⁹ John Herman Randall, "Epilogue: The Nature of Naturalism," in Krikorian, *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, 367.

²⁰ Frederick Beiser, *Late German Idealism: Trendelenburg and Lotze* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). I thank John Shook for this connection.

²¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1921), 5.

The realist explosion came between 1897 and 1904, ignited by Ernst Mach (1897), Edmund Husserl (1901), Bertrand Russell (1903), G. E. Moore (1903), Henri Bergson (1903), and William James (1904).²² Mach described sensations as objective facts; Husserl called philosophers “back to the things themselves”; Russell and Moore left idealism and “allowed ourselves to think that the grass is green”; James rejected the difference between physical and mental substances; and Bergson celebrated the direct realism of intuition. James’s 1898 Berkeley address made pragmatism a public movement, creating a three-cornered debate between idealism, pragmatism, and realism, although pragmatists like James considered themselves realists.²³ Shortly thereafter, in England T. P. Nunn and Samuel Alexander promoted “English Realism.”²⁴ Six Americans inspired by James’s post-1904 “radical empiricism” inaugurated an “American New Realism” in a 1910 manifesto and subsequent book.²⁵ Russell found himself “in almost complete agreement” with the new realists.²⁶

The realism debate generated a series of doctrines, some barely remembered. Several of the realists were naturalists who argued that life and mind “emerge” from matter: the Englishmen Conwy Lloyd Morgan and C. D. Broad, Australian Samuel Alexander, Canadian R. W. Sellars, and Americans W. M. Wheeler and G. H. Mead.²⁷ Mach, James, and Russell

²² Ernst Mach, *Contributions to the Analysis of the Sensations*, trans. C. M. Williams (Chicago: Open Court, 1897); Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 2, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); Russell, *Principles of Mathematics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1903); George Edward Moore, “The Refutation of Idealism,” *Mind* 12, no. 48 (1903): 433–53; Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York: G. E. Putnam and Sons, 1912); and William James, “Does Consciousness Exist?,” *JPPSM* 1, no. 18 (1904): 477–91, and “A World of Pure Experience,” *JPPSM* 1, no. 20 (1904): 533–54, and no. 21 (1904): 561–70, republished in James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1912).

²³ James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” *University Chronicle* 1, no. 4 (1898): 287–310.

²⁴ See Thomas Percy Nunn, “Are Secondary Qualities Independent of Perception?,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 10 (1909): 191–218; Samuel Alexander, *The Basis of Realism: Proceedings of the British Academy* (London: Oxford University, 1914); and Omar W. Nasim, *Bertrand Russell and the Edwardian Philosophers: Constructing the World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

²⁵ Edwin Bissell Holt, Walter Taylor Marvin, William Pepperell Montague, Ralph Barton Perry, Walter Broughton Pitkin, and Edward Gleason Spaulding, “The Program and First Platform of Six Realists,” *JPPSM* 3, no. 15 (1910): 393–40, and Holt, *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1912). See also Cornelis De Waal, *American New Realism: 1910–1920* (New York: Thoemmes, 2001).

²⁶ Russell, “The Basis of Realism,” *JPPSM* 8, no. 6 (1911): 160.

²⁷ Conwy Lloyd Morgan, *Emergent Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1927); Alexander, *Space, Time, and Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1920); Charles Dutton Broad, *The Mind and Its Place in Nature* (London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1925); Roy Wood

embraced the view that matter and mind are functions of or relations among elements that are neither.²⁸ A related view from the new realists held that each entity is intrinsically related to other objects (not subjects), hence multiple. Finally, the “critical realists” arose in opposition to the new realists, formulating their views in the 1921 volume *Critical Realism: A Co-operative Study of the Problem of Knowledge*, including papers by Arthur O. Lovejoy, George Santayana, Sellars, and others.²⁹ All these views were part of a rich discussion from 1910 to 1930.

But the slogan “realism” hid differences the realists did not always recognize. Leaving aside value theory (i.e., aesthetic, ethical, or political realism), we must distinguish at least five forms of realism active in the debate. Platonic or Scholastic realism, which we might call *logical realism*, holds that universals, including the abstract objects of logic and mathematics, are real independent of mental acts and physical particulars. It opposes the nominalist claim that universal terms are merely a device for referring to sets of particulars, as well as psychologism, which derives logic and mathematics from habits of thought. Distinct but related is *relational realism*, the view that relations are real independent of the mind and not reducible to substances and their properties, opposing the idealist view that relations are properties of the knowing mind. This had been suggested by Peirce’s associate F. E. Abbot, then by Peirce’s and Russell’s separate logics of relations.³⁰ *Perceptual realism*, often called direct or naïve realism, holds that perception grasps real things or real states of affairs, opposed by the representationalist view of dualism. Finally are *metaphysical realism* and *epistemic realism*; the first holds that there are mind-independent realities, the second that the known character of things is not dependent on the

Sellars, *Evolutionary Naturalism* (Chicago: Open Court, 1922); William Morton Wheeler, *Emergent Evolution and the Development of Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1928); George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

²⁸ See Mach, *Contributions to the Analysis of the Sensations*; James, “Does Consciousness Exist?” and “A World of Pure Experience”; Russell, “Mind and Matter,” in *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956); and Eric Banks, *The Empirical Realism of Mach, James, and Russell: Neutral Monism Reconceived* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²⁹ Drake Durant, Arthur O. Lovejoy, James Bissett Pratt, Arthur K. Rogers, George Santayana, Roy Wood Sellars, and Charles A. Strong, *Critical Realism: A Co-operative Study of the Problem of Knowledge* (New York: Macmillan, 1920). The book’s title came from Sellars’s earlier book *Critical Realism* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1916).

³⁰ Francis Ellingwood Abbot, “The Philosophy of Space and Time,” *North American Review* 99, no. 204 (1864): 64–116, and *Scientific Theism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1888). Schneider called this “objective relativism” in *A History of American Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 282.

knowing. The opposite of the first is some kind of idealism; the opposite of the second is (in contemporary terms) relativism or antirealism.

While the realists did attack metaphysical idealism, the discussion actually centered on two other issues, logical-relational realism and perceptual realism, each dragging with them metaphysical and epistemic consequences, and forming two overlapping groups. The first fought for logical realism against nominalism and psychologism. Some claimed logical objects and meanings “subsisted” as a “third realm” distinct from the mental and the physical (e.g., the “golden mountain” of Alexius Meinong). The second group argued that perception directly presents real things. If the perceived objects are members of the “third realm,” they “subsist” like meanings. However, for naturalists or monists who accept no division between a realm of “essences” or “meanings” and physical things, perceptual realism became “naïve” realism.

This generated two related doctrines whose distinction only later became clear. First, if objects are conceived as relational, then the difference between “real” and “apparent,” “subjective” and “objective,” even “physical” and “mental” can be analyzed as two relational functions of the same things. Is the pencil dipped in water bent or straight? Mach said the very same fundamental content or elements “in their functional dependence [on the perceiver] . . . are sensations. In another functional connexion they are at the same time physical objects.”³¹ This came to be called “neutral monism,” a view Russell maintained most of his life.³²

Second, the bent pencil is as “objective” as the straight one. As E. B. Holt, editor of *The New Realism* (and mentor of J. J. Gibson, the inventor of ecological psychology), wrote, “things *are* just what they *seem*.”³³ The train tracks are parallel when we ride them *and* actually do converge in the distance in our vision. The tracks only occur in relations, yielding two separate but equal occurrences, the “tracks-in-relation-to-train” and “tracks-in-relation-to-vision-when-standing-on-them.” The tracks are multiple. “All things,” Holt argued, “physical, mental, and logical . . . subsist.”³⁴ This

³¹ Mach, *Contributions to the Analysis of the Sensations*, 10–16.

³² Russell, “On the Nature of Acquaintance: II. Neutral Monism,” *The Monist* 24, no. 2 (April 1914): 161–87. See also John Ongley and Rosalind Carey, *Russell: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

³³ Holt, introduction, *The New Realism*, 2. Emphasis in original. See also his *The Concept of Consciousness* (London: George Allen, 1914); and Harry Haidt, *Ecological Psychology in Context: James Gibson, Roger Barker, and the Legacy of William James’s Radical Empiricism* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), chap. 2. My thanks to Elizabeth Baeten for this connection.

³⁴ Holt, “The Place of Illusory Experience in a Realistic World,” in *The New Realism*, 372.

includes error, illusion, and hallucination: “every content . . . real or unreal, subsists . . . in the all-inclusive universe of being . . . this being is not ‘subjective in nature.’”³⁵

A decade later, this view would come to be called objective relativism (or “relativist objectivism”).³⁶ It was so denominated in 1927 by Arthur E. Murphy to mean the claim that “The objective facts of the world of nature . . . are the very ‘apparent’ and relative happenings directly disclosed . . . in perception. . . . Such relativity is hence an ultimate fact about the objective world.”³⁷ Adherents took inspiration from Einstein’s special theory of the relativity of spatial and temporal properties of events. Lovejoy, a critical realist, made the term famous by way of strenuous critique in his 1930 *The Revolt Against Dualism*. As Oliver later put it: the naïve realist says the apple *is* sweet; the critical realist says it has traits that *produce* the experience of sweetness; the “perspective” or objective relativist says it is *sweet in relation to* our taste and *not sweet* in other relations.³⁸ But for the critical realists and Russell, objective relativism seemed to reintroduce the “internal relations” that had made idealism anti-realist. If objective relativism allows *a*’s relation *R* to *b* to alter or constitute *a*—if the relation *Rb* is an internal relation for *a*—then the *a* of *aRb* is different from *a* itself or from the *a* of *aRc*. And if *b* and *c* are perceptions, they perceive *different a*’s. The first would destroy metaphysical, the second epistemic, realism. We will return to this issue.

All of these ideas, and more, can be found in Cohen’s early papers during World War I. We will track Cohen’s views, first regarding logical and relational realism, then perceptual and metaphysical realism, with epistemic issues appearing throughout.

LOGICAL AND RELATIONAL REALISM

Cohen was a polymath: philosophy, logic, mathematics, physics, history, jurisprudence. During his undergraduate days at CCNY’s combined high

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 366.

³⁶ The latter was Montague’s term for Holt’s position. William Pepperell Montague, “The Story of American Realism,” *Philosophy: Royal Institute of Philosophy* 12, no. 46 (April 1937): 151.

³⁷ Arthur E. Murphy, “Objective Relativism in Whitehead and Dewey,” *Philosophical Review* 36, no. 2 (1927): 122.

³⁸ See Donald Oliver, “The Logic of Perspective Realism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 35, no. 8 (1938): 197.

school–college program, 1895–1900, he was mentored by Thomas Davidson, who ran the Educational Alliance in New York for immigrants (Cohen taught in its “Breadwinners College”), and Felix Adler, founder of the Ethical Culture Society (which funded Cohen’s graduate studies). After taking classes at Columbia, he went to Harvard in 1904 for his Ph.D. (his roommate was future Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter). He admired Josiah Royce’s logical realism, and liked James but thought him a nominalist. After graduation in 1906, he taught mathematics at CCNY, was active in the APA, and published in *JPPSM*. He finally obtained a philosophy appointment at CCNY in 1912 at the age of 32. (In his autobiography the section on 1900–12 is titled “The Valley of Humiliation”!)

Cohen sided with the American new realists but claimed their proper target should be “epistemological subjectivism,” that is, empiricism and representationalism, not Royce’s idealism.³⁹ His greatest source of inspiration was the realism and logicism of Russell’s 1903 *Principles of Mathematics*. Russell’s realism of relations harmonized—as Cohen was one of the few to recognize—with Peirce’s logic, as well as later with Einstein’s theory of relativity, which Cohen came to know well (he would shepherd the great man around during Einstein’s 1921 CCNY visit). The central point is that the objects of logic and mathematics, including relations, are real independent of mind. In a 1911 paper Cohen opposes the “pestiferous dogma that reality can be apprehended only through sense perception, a dogma as gratuitous as would be the assumption that all reality is audible.”⁴⁰ Note here the unusual argument: since human senses are a contingent product of evolution, and nonhumans have different senses, how can we assume our five canonical senses exhaust information about the world, any more than *one* sense could? At the same time, non-Euclidean geometry demonstrates that “all empirical results can be interpreted equally well in terms of a non-Euclidean system.”⁴¹ Hence logical and mathematical rules are not “laws of thought,” for Cohen an utterly misleading expression, nor laws of a special set of entities. They are *invariant relations among all possible objects*. Logical realism implies that possibilities must be as real as actualities. He concludes that “a view which regards . . . nature as composed of real terms and real relations between them can be neither a chopped up atomism nor a dull monism.”⁴²

³⁹ Cohen, “Neo-Realism and the Philosophy of Royce,” *Philosophical Review* 25, no. 3 (1916): 378–82.

⁴⁰ Cohen, “The Present Situation in the Philosophy of Mathematics,” *JPPSM* 8, no. 20 (1911): 542.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 538.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 545.

In a 1913 essay, Cohen derides Russell's (and Meinong's) term "subsistence" as "make-shift." The assertion of subsistence comes from a mistaken prejudice that only actual present particulars deserve the term "existence." If mathematical facts, incorporated into physics, serve as constraints on physical events, then there is no reason to ascribe them a lesser form of existence. Our most objective and scientific understanding of the world requires reference to past events, possibilities, universals, etc. The objects of all sciences obtain in some universe of discourse—this includes fictional objects (e.g., Hamlet). Instead of a dualism of subsistence and existence, we need only specify the set of relations, system, or universe of discourse of which we are speaking.⁴³

Cohen applies his view to physics in the 1918 "Mechanism and Causality in Physics." He argues that mechanism, the claim that the ultimate structure of things consists in "the hidden motions of particles" under forces, is not universal for all physical phenomena—e.g., electromagnetism and thermodynamics. Scientific procedure presupposes that "the logically necessary relations which hold between mathematical expressions hold of natural phenomena themselves."⁴⁴ But while physical entities obey invariances, because they are "complexes" not all their characters are expressed by such rules; there is always variation among other properties. Causality requires that like implies like, but likeness is a matter of degree; all explained phenomena show small variations not captured by our, nevertheless, true laws. The application of the laws of physics must be statistically approximate, as Peirce had suggested. Still, as Cohen argues in a 1925 paper on Spinoza, the mathematical attempt to see things "under the aspect of eternity" remains valid. Spinoza's "ideas" are essences or meanings, obtaining in "eternity," which means not that they are "everlasting" but simply not subject to time. Material particulars obtain in time, which measures their changes; the continuity represented by the curved line on the graph gives the essence of its datapoints or particulars, but is not a particular itself. Thus "To see things 'under the aspect of eternity'—*sub specie aeternitatis*—is to see their actual meaning," and is entirely compatible with science.⁴⁵

I will discuss Cohen's most systematic work, the 1931 *Reason and Nature*, more fully in the next section. First, some formulations from A

⁴³ Cohen, "The New Realism," *JPPSM* 10, no. 8 (1913): 199.

⁴⁴ Cohen, "Mechanism and Causality in Physics," *JPPSM* 15, no. 14 (1918): 382.

⁴⁵ Cohen, "The Intellectual Love of God," in Cohen, *The Faith of a Liberal*, 312. Orig., *The Menorah Journal* 11, no. 4 (August 1925): 332–41. Earlier version, "Amor Dei Intellectualis," *Chronicon Spinozanum* 3, no. 75c (1923): 3–19.

Preface to Logic—published in 1944, but comprised largely of early pieces that Cohen may have selected before he fell ill in 1942—deserve mention.⁴⁶ For Cohen, logical, mathematical, and scientific laws are laws of possibilities dictating how things can or cannot be related. The relation of logical incompatibility, he wrote, is “as hard an objective fact as the relations of gravitation, digestion, or warfare.”⁴⁷ Cohen’s reasoning comes from his unusual combined attention to formal logic and ordinary language examples. Necessity is necessity. Logic and science are in the business of ruling out possibilities. The “metaphysical status” of empirical facts and abstractions is not the issue. The fact that abstractions (such as triangularity) do not occur by themselves, but only along with other things (such as matter), is no stranger than the fact that Jack being a brother cannot occur without Jack also being a human being, a male, having mass, etc. Thus triangles exist as fully as brothers do.⁴⁸ What the formal principles of logic and mathematics cannot do is demonstrate the *actuality* of anything. No possibilities obtain except as possibilities of actualities, so there are no possible worlds. The presence of possibilities means nothing can be fully determinate or actual in every respect. Possibility and actuality, like universal and particular, form and matter, relation and term, are always involved with each other. Every term is a “complex of things-in-relation.”⁴⁹

PERCEPTUAL AND METAPHYSICAL REALISM

A series of papers starting in 1913 were stimulated by a disagreement between Cohen and Lovejoy on the status of secondary qualities.⁵⁰ This was an important issue in the evolving debate over perceptual realism, involving T. P. Nunn, Alexander, and Russell. Lovejoy, supported by William Pepperell Montague, argued that the relativity of secondary qualities indicated that they are mental or subjective.⁵¹ Cohen attacked the main

⁴⁶ Hollinger, personal communication.

⁴⁷ Cohen, *A Preface to Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1944), 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁰ Lovejoy, “Present Philosophical Tendencies: Idealism and Realism,” *JPPSM* 9, no. 25 (1912): 675; Cohen, “Notes and News: Letter From Professor Cohen,” *JPPSM* 10, no. 1 (1913): 27–28; Lovejoy, “Discussion: Secondary Qualities and Subjectivity,” *JPPSM* 10, no. 8 (1913): 214–18; Cohen, “The Supposed Contradiction in the Diversity of Secondary Qualities—A Reply,” *JPPSM* 10, no. 19 (1913): 510–12; Lovejoy, “Relativity, Reality, and Contradiction,” *JPPSM* 11, no. 16 (1914): 421–30; Cohen, “Qualities, Relations, and Things,” *JPPSM* 11, no. 23 (1914): 617–27.

⁵¹ Montague, “Unreal Subsistence and Consciousness,” *Philosophical Review* 23, no. 1 (1914): 48–64.

point, as well as the underlying claim that a thing cannot be claimed to have two “contrary” secondary qualities: e.g., be both red and blue. Cohen recognized that this was the lynchpin of a distinctive metaphysical perspective, and called it his “metaphysical babe.” The following is the crucial passage:

is [there] a contradiction in the assertion that the same object can be really red and blue? . . . it would be peculiar if the principle of contradiction, obviously a formal one, could tell us that certain empirical qualities like red and blue are contradictory, but that others like red and soft are not so. Red and blue are certainly no more contradictory than kindness and cruelty, yet the same man may in one transaction display kindness to A and cruelty to B. . . . The principle of contradiction . . . can have no application to a single assertion which predicates different qualities of the same object in different relations. . . . As a thing shifts from one context to another, it acquires new relations and drops old ones, and in all transformations there is a . . . re-adjustment of the line between the internal relations which constitute the essence and the external relations which are outside the inner circle. . . . The world of existence is thus a network of relations whose intersections are called terms. These termini may be complex or simple, but the simplicity is always relative to the system in which they enter. . . . Even the mathematical point is . . . simple . . . only in point geometry. In line geometry a point is a complex formed by the intersection of two lines. . . . The metaphysic here suggested starting with the relational structure of things avoids the ontologic ills that beset things in themselves.⁵²

Again, Cohen’s analysis of examples is of interest. His first point is that the principle of non-contradiction cannot tell that “red” and “blue” are contraries but “red” and “soft” are not. Because logic does not concern the meaning of “A” and “B,” the only logical contrary of A is “not-A” (e.g., “not-red”), not B, C, D, etc. $A=B$ (“red is blue”) no more violates a logical rule than $2 + 2=4$. Further, the same entity *can* be red and not-red in relations to different entities, just as Fred be a brother to Nancy but not to Marie. Last, science—e.g., experimental psychology—explains the perception of color and tone with optics and physiology, natural “objective” facts,

⁵² Cohen, “Qualities, Relations, and Things,” 620–22.

not “consciousness.” What is a circle from one perspective *must* be an ellipse from another, or something would be wrong with the science of optics. Relativity is a scientific fact. No term can have an “essence” or “character” independent of all relations to other things. While not reducible to relations, terms and truths about them hold only *in* relations.

In a 1916 paper, Cohen—perhaps expressing his noted fear of agreement—criticizes the key term and slogan of the new realist movement in which he was a *de facto* participant: he argues that “real” serves no useful purpose in philosophy! Cohen writes, “the great need of philosophic discussion is for terms that have a definite connotation rather than an honorific use. . . . *Reality*, let us admit, has become a term of popular philosophic cant taking the place that words like *nice* or *grand* have among the less cultivated. . . . Why can’t we agree to eliminate these banal words altogether?”⁵³ “Real” has become an honorific or eulogistic term. But to reject it implies that the reality–appearance distinction can be taken over by some other conceptual tool. What would that be? In Cohen’s 1917 paper “The Mental and the Physical,” in a section in which he notes that neutral monism “may as well be called [neutral] *pluralism*,” he answers:

The assertion that the mental and the physical are complexes of neutral entities may suggest the question, where and when do these entities exist. . . . The answer is that anything may be said to exist in a given universe of discourse if it can be shown that it occupies a position therein. Thus Hamlet’s melancholy . . . exists in Shakespeare’s play, and the roots of equations exist in the number system. . . . I believe that few habits would be more useful to philosophy than the habit of refusing to discuss whether certain entities exist, unless we ask *exist how? or in what kind of a system?*⁵⁴

In a 1927 essay, “Concepts and Twilight Zones,” Cohen presents the one novel term generally known from his metaphysical thought, “polarity,” which “generalizes as the principle . . . of the necessary copresence and mutual dependence of opposite determinations . . . It warns us against . . . the easy artificial dilemma between unity and plurality, rest and motion, substance and function, actual and ideal.” He then proposes that “twilight

⁵³ Cohen, “The Use of the Words Real and Unreal,” *JPPSM* 13, no. 23 (1916): 638.

⁵⁴ Cohen, “The Distinction between the Mental and the Physical,” *JPPSM* 14, no. 10 (1917): 266–67. My emphasis.

zones . . . are regions about the point of equilibrium of opposing tendencies,” zones of high indeterminacy. Cohen concludes, “all concepts which swallow up their own negatives . . . reality, existence, experience . . . are . . . indefinite in meaning.”⁵⁵

Cohen explains this more fully in his one published attempt to integrate his claims, the 1931 *Reason and Nature*, particularly the chapter “The Metaphysics of Reason and Scientific Method.” Cohen credits Adler, Royce, and Wilmon Sheldon with inspiring the idea of polarity.⁵⁶ The object of inquiry is always initially a “vague complex” in which we find both particularity and universality, actuality and possibility. In any fact or event, two opposing principles or forces or factors—“unity and plurality, similarity and difference, dependence and independence, form and matter, change and permanence”—are present. The poles are equally “real” and necessary, like the opposing blades of a scissors, or the process of guiding a carriage down a hill, which requires the driver to urge the horses forward *and* to keep his foot on the brake. Unfortunately, philosophers tend to make one side ultimate and the other derivative. The “Whole” taken collectively is one of those terms that “swallow their own negatives,” hence their chance for determinateness. The universe is determinate only “distributively”:

the principle of sufficient reason . . . is incompatible with the view that regards the total universe as the cause of any of its constituent facts. . . . This is not to deny the determinateness of the universe in a *distributive* sense, i.e. in the sense that each thing in it is determinate. But the absolute collective whole is . . . undetermined by anything outside of it; nor can the absolutely total universe be said to have any definite character from which we can infer that some particular entity has one rather than another determinate trait.⁵⁷

Summarizing, we see here the pieces of a coherent vision distinct from James, Mach, Russell, and the new realists. From his (i) logical realism, Cohen was led to (ii) relational realism, which, combined with (iii) perceptual realism, led to (iv) the conception of every object as a complex-thing-in-relations, hence (v) never simple, thereby (vi) eliminating the reality–appearance distinction and implying (vii) a neutral pluralism, which

⁵⁵ Cohen, “Concepts and Twilight Zones,” *Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 25 (1927): 769.

⁵⁶ Cohen, *A Dreamer’s Journey*, 170; Hollinger, *Morris R. Cohen*, 119.

⁵⁷ Cohen, “The Metaphysics of Reason and Scientific Method,” *Reason and Nature: An Essay on the Meaning of Scientific Method* (New York: Dover Publications, 1931), 152–53. My emphasis.

involved a denial of (viii) any collective description of reality or being, in favor of (ix) a distributive use of “existence,” leaving the proper metaphysical task to say (x) “how” things function in their various relations.

COHEN’S METAPHYSICAL LEGACY

Judging by citations, most would ask, “what legacy?” But there is one: Cohen seems to have been the first philosopher of the period to analyze the world fully in the manner of what came to be called “objective relativism.” Certainly aspects thereof were evident in Mach and James, in Holt and other new realists by 1912. Cohen noted in 1914 that “the neo-realists have been at pains to compile a long list of . . . instances of physical or objective relativity.”⁵⁸ Objective relativity appeared in multiple works from 1926 to 1934: in Mead’s “The Objective Reality of Perspectives” (1926); Murphy’s essay on Whitehead and Dewey, naming the view (1927); Lovejoy’s critique in *The Revolt Against Dualism* (1930); and McGilvary’s “perspective realism” (1933).⁵⁹ After 1934 it largely disappeared. Eventually Murphy would ask, “What Happened to Objective Relativism?”⁶⁰ It was later applied by some to ethics.⁶¹ Yet objective relativism in its original meaning did survive in one venue: Columbia.

The twentieth-century Columbia philosophy department began with the arrival of the Aristotelian Woodbridge as chairman in 1902. Within three years he had co-founded *JPPSM*, brought Dewey from Chicago, and acquired Wendell T. Bush, a Harvard student of the other prominent American naturalist of the time, and rival to Dewey, George Santayana. This set the stage for a unique combination of Aristotelianism, pragmatism, and two related but competing forms of non-reductive naturalism. With judicious hiring, particularly of their own students in the 1920s and ’30s—including Schneider, Randall, Irwin Edman, Horace Friess, and James

⁵⁸ Cohen, “Qualities, Relations, and Things,” 625.

⁵⁹ Mead, “The Objective Reality of Perspectives,” *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy*, ed. Edgar Brightman (1926): 75–85, and *Mind, Self, and Society*; Evander Bradley McGilvary, “Perceptual and Memory Perspectives,” *Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 12 (1933): 309–30; Lovejoy, *The Revolt Against Dualism*, 79–155; and Oliver, “The Logic of Perspective Realism.”

⁶⁰ Murphy, “What Happened to Objective Relativism?,” in *Reason and the Common Good* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

⁶¹ Larry Hickman, “Objective Relativism,” *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

Gutmann—they established the philosophical orientation that would become known as “Columbia naturalism.”⁶²

Ernest Nagel (1901–85) was a member of that “second-generation” of Columbia naturalists.⁶³ A student of Dewey’s as well as Cohen’s, he received his Ph.D. in 1931 just after Dewey retired, and was immediately appointed as a faculty member. With the possible exception of Sidney Hook in the social and political arena, Nagel would become Cohen’s most prominent philosophy student. His landmark 1961 *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* set the standard for philosophy of science in post-war America.⁶⁴

Like his teacher, Nagel pursued interests in Peirce, logic, and science, and in 1934 he published a logic textbook with Cohen.⁶⁵ That year he also traveled to Vienna and Poland to study the logic of Carnap and Tarski (and met Wittgenstein at Cambridge), just as Harvard’s Willard Van Orman Quine had done two years earlier. Nagel dutifully reported his experiences to Cohen by letter.⁶⁶ But afterwards he turned toward logical empiricism. In the 1920s a bridge already existed between pragmatism and logical empiricism, built by Clarence Irving Lewis at Harvard. Now a new generation scampered across. Like Quine, like Morton White (another Cohen student and Quine’s colleague at Harvard), and like Charles Morris at Chicago, Nagel served as a conduit for the transition from earlier American thought to the new logical philosophy.

For logical empiricism, logic is itself meaningless, a prescriptive syntax. Nagel held that Carnap’s view of logic was compatible with Dewey’s; positivism and pragmatism were akin.⁶⁷ Their clearest point of agreement was the rejection of metaphysics, hence of any realist view of logic, like Cohen’s. Citing a letter from Lewis Feuer, Hollinger recounts a confrontation between teacher and student in the late 1930s: “At a conference at the New School for Social Research, recalls one witness, ‘Nagel turned on Cohen with great vehemence’ for believing that the ‘external world’ had a logical

⁶² See Randall, “The Department of Philosophy,” in *A History of the Faculty of Philosophy: Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957).

⁶³ See Andrew Jewett, “Canonizing Dewey: Naturalism, Logical Empiricism, and the Idea of American Philosophy,” *Modern Intellectual History* 8, no. 1 (April 2011): 91–125.

⁶⁴ Nagel, *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961).

⁶⁵ Cohen and Nagel, *An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934).

⁶⁶ Cohen Rosenfield, *Portrait of a Philosopher*, 392–408.

⁶⁷ See Patrick Suppes, “Nagel’s Lectures on Dewey’s Logic,” in *Philosophy, Science, and Method: Essays in Honor of Ernest Nagel*, ed. Sidney Morgenbesser et al. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1969), 2–25.

structure; such beliefs, asserted Nagel, were ‘meaningless.’ Cohen replied soberly that he did, indeed, hold such beliefs. Cohen ‘became very pale’ as the exchange went on, while ‘the audience sat tense,’ watching Cohen’s repudiation by one of his most brilliant students.’⁶⁸

Feuer’s recounting may be overstated; Nagel later professed fond feelings for Cohen.⁶⁹ (And ironically, soon afterwards Cohen would share an office with Carnap at Chicago.⁷⁰) But whatever Nagel’s attitude, for Cohen the event signified not only that his most successful student of logic and science thought he was fundamentally wrong, but that the younger generation, hence the future, was moving away from, not toward, his views. In 1944 Nagel published his famous paper “Logic without Ontology” in the Krikorian volume, which was dedicated to the by-then infirm Cohen. The paper directly repudiated Cohen without naming him; Nagel used a passage from Cohen, in quotes but unattributed, as an exemplar of error.⁷¹ Thus is Cohen’s final decade a personal vignette of the transformation of philosophy in America.

Nagel’s colleague John Herman Randall (1899–1980) was a Columbia man from his first day of college until retirement. Randall was above all a historian and philosopher of history.⁷² Inspired by his teacher Woodbridge, he interpreted Aristotle as a “functionalist” in Columbia naturalist terms, which is to say, as compatible with Dewey.⁷³ Randall’s thought intersected with Cohen’s. Two years before his Ph.D., his 1920 paper “The Really Real” criticized the use of that term, as Cohen had done in 1916.⁷⁴ Like Cohen he was a founding editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. In the Krikorian volume, Randall was the only contributor who significantly

⁶⁸ Hollinger, *Morris R. Cohen*, 124.

⁶⁹ Hollinger, personal communication.

⁷⁰ Cohen Rosenfield, *Portrait of a Philosopher*, 124; and Hollinger, *Morris R. Cohen*, 124.

⁷¹ The embedded quotation from Cohen, *A Preface to Logic*, 7, is at Ernest Nagel, “Logic Without Ontology,” in Krikorian, *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, 214–15, and Nagel’s *Logic Without Metaphysics and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956), 61.

⁷² See Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926); *Nature and Historical Experience: Essays in Naturalism and in the Theory of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958); *The Career of Philosophy*, vol. 1, *From the Enlightenment to the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); *The Career of Philosophy*, vol. 2, *From the German Enlightenment to the Age of Darwin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); and *Philosophy After Darwin: Chapters for the Career of Philosophy*, vol. 3, *And Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

⁷³ Randall, *Aristotle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

⁷⁴ Randall, “The Really Real,” *JPPSM* 17, no. 13 (1920): 337–45.

referred to Cohen (and did so repeatedly). In 1955 he admired the late Cohen as “the true embodiment of philosophical reason . . . the very model of what philosophy at its best can do in fruitful intercourse with all man’s intellectual enterprises.”⁷⁵ And in a remarkable note from 1930, Randall, then a tenured professor, wrote to Cohen that while he had learned much from Adler, Woodbridge, and Dewey, “there is no philosopher with whom I seem logically fated never to find myself in disagreement save yourself . . . there is no other man in the world I would rather be than yourself.”⁷⁶

Randall adopted objective relativism starting at least in 1939.⁷⁷ In a 1946 paper on Aristotle he wrote,

Such an analytic and empirical metaphysics [i.e., Aristotle’s] does not find that existence forms a ‘Totality’ or ‘Whole.’ Existence is always plural and determinate. . . . We can . . . talk significantly about ‘the universe’ or existence in general. But when we do, we are talking *distributively*, about *any existence* . . . not . . . about some unified all-embracing Substance or Being or Reality or Whole. . . . Nor does empirical metaphysics agree . . . in finding ‘the Real’ at the end of a long search. . . . No, *everything encountered in any way is somehow real*. The significant question is, not whether anything is ‘real’ or not, but *how and in what sense it is real*, and *how it . . . functions among other reals*.⁷⁸

Interest in objective relativism peaked at Columbia in the 1950s. Thomas Robischon’s 1955 dissertation on objective relativism was advised by Joseph Blau, with Randall and Nagel on his committee.⁷⁹ E. B. McGilvary’s long-awaited *Toward a Perspective Realism* came out posthumously in 1956; it was discussed in manuscript by Robischon.⁸⁰ Randall’s 1958

⁷⁵ Randall, review of *American Thought: A Critical Sketch*, by Morris R. Cohen, ed. Felix Cohen, *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 1 (1955): 78.

⁷⁶ Randall, 20 January 1930 letter to Cohen, Morris Raphael Cohen Papers [B10, F13], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁷⁷ Randall, “On Understanding the History of Philosophy,” *Journal of Philosophy* 36, no. 17 (1939): 472.

⁷⁸ Randall, “Metaphysics: Its Function, Consequences, and Criteria,” *Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 15 (1946): 406. Second emphasis Randall’s, all else mine.

⁷⁹ Thomas Robischon, “Objective Relativism in American Philosophy,” Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1955, and “What Is Objective Relativism?,” *Journal of Philosophy* 55, no. 26 (1958): 1117–32. My thanks to Mariona Barkus, and to Noah Robischon for access to Robischon’s unpublished autobiography.

⁸⁰ McGilvary, *Toward a Perspective Realism*, ed. A. G. Ramsperger (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1956).

Nature and Historical Experience repeatedly endorsed objective relativism.⁸¹ And at the same moment yet another Columbia professor, and Cohen student, did as well.

In his published work at that time Randall frequently thanked a younger colleague, Justus Buchler (1914–91). A student of Cohen's who finished his Ph.D. on Peirce under Nagel in 1938, Buchler and Randall became colleagues in 1942 and collaborated in teaching and writing (also with the philosopher Evelyn Shirk, who was married to Buchler).⁸² Buchler would eventually compose his own philosophical system in several books starting in the early 1950s. In 1955 Buchler noted in his *Nature and Judgment* that his own theory might be considered a kind of "objective relativism."⁸³

While Buchler almost never referred to Cohen, his 1966 *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* is the nearest thing to a systematic metaphysics reflecting Cohen's ideas.⁸⁴ For Buchler, anything discriminable is a "natural complex." He offers the "principle of ontological parity" that nothing can be more real or existential than anything else. Possibilities are as real as actualities, and no actuality lacks possibilities. Complexes obtain in relations to other complexes, each set of relations being an "order." A complex's "integrity" is *how* it functions in that order. The *relata* of an order can be "strongly" (or "internally") related to the complex, hence make a difference to its integrity in that order, or "weakly" ("externally") related to the complex's "scope" in the order. Every complex is related to some other complexes, but not to *all* complexes. No complex is simple, and because all are related to at least one external complex, the collection of all complexes is not a complex. There is no "Order of all orders," no "unlimited" order. What about nature itself? Like the other Columbians, Buchler

⁸¹ Randall, *Nature and Historical Experience*, 180–93.

⁸² Randall and Justus Buchler, *Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1942); *Readings in Philosophy*, ed. Buchler, Randall, and Evelyn Shirk (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1946).

⁸³ Buchler, *Nature and Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 128. See also Buchler, *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951); Buchler, *The Main of Light: On the Concept of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Beth Singer, *Ordinal Naturalism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Justus Buchler* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1983); and *Nature's Perspectives: Prospects for an Ordinal Metaphysics*, ed. Armen Marsoobian, Kathleen Wallace, and Robert S. Corrington (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

⁸⁴ Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, ed. Kathleen Wallace and Armen Marsoobian, with Robert S. Corrington (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). The sole reference to Cohen is at Buchler, *The Concept of Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 1–8.

considered his view a kind of naturalism, but recognized that for him “naturalism” could mean nothing more than the absence of “absolutely discontinuous orders,” the rejection of a “natural vs. supra-natural” distinction. Two years before his death, he said in an interview, “I can’t really say that ‘I am a naturalist.’”⁸⁵ If “nature” is a term for “the Whole,” a consistent objective relativist cannot have a substantive notion of it.

What does this history teach us? Most versions of objective relativism—from Holt to Murphy to McGilvary to Robischon—treated the “relativity” of things to the human agent differently from the intramural relativity or relatedness of nonhuman things. Relativity was real but linked to the presence of an observer. That is why some called it “perspective” realism. But Cohen summarized his view as “the position that relativity is a characteristic of the real world and not merely a figment of intellect.”⁸⁶ Nagel’s 1947 essay followed suit. Likewise Buchler’s “complex,” “integrity,” “trait,” and “order” apply indifferently to any complexes; human perspectives are merely one type of order establishing relativity. Buchler’s relativism is fully “objective.” The template of complex-with-traits-in-an-order applies distributively to any system of any kind. Buchler’s theory is thus a systematic, distributive objective relativism, which Cohen imagined piecemeal but could not achieve.

However, we must ask: isn’t objective relativism, while historically interesting, a dead end? Doesn’t it undermine realism, as Russell and the critical realists thought? In his 1911 paper, Russell lauded the new realists for accepting that “*a* may have a relation to a term *b* without there being any constituent of *a* corresponding to this relation.”⁸⁷ Internal relations imply a constituent or property of *a* that corresponds to the relation, hence makes a difference to what *a* is. If *a*’s relations to *b* and to *c* make such a difference, then the *a* of *aRb* and *aRc* are *two different a*’s. And if *b* and *c* are human perceptions, they do not perceive the same *a*. Russell concluded such internal relations turned the world into “jelly . . . in the fact that, if you touched any one part of it, the whole quivered.”⁸⁸ Can objective relativism avoid collapsing the world into jelly?

Russell and the objective relativists agreed on metaphysical, epistemic, and relational realism: there are objects with mind-independent properties

⁸⁵ Corrington, “Conversation between Justus Buchler and Robert S. Corrington,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 3, no. 4 (1989): 262.

⁸⁶ Cohen, *A Dreamer’s Journey*, 185–86.

⁸⁷ Russell, “The Basis of Realism,” 159.

⁸⁸ Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude, 1872–1921* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 114.

perceived or known as such, which may bear real relations. But Russell claimed a 's properties are not dependent on its relations: Rb , Rc , etc. If b is a perception of a , Rb is not a difference-making property of a —it is external and/or subjective, a property of b or the mind having b . The objective relativist claims, in contrast, that the multiple occurrences of a , with distinctive properties, including perceptions, *belong to a*, are functions of a in different orders. The fact that aRb is not identical to aRc or a does *not* mean that a is different in each, or that a has changed. For a is a , aRb is another complex, and aRc is a third. But what, then, can aRb and aRc have to do with a ? That is the issue: how can a be *one thing*—identifiable and re-identifiable as a —while “owning” non-identical aRb and aRc , each of which can be treated as *another thing*?

Only by adopting the view that *to be a discriminable something is to be a sameness occurring in multiple contextual integrities that are themselves discriminable somethings*. This is what it means to be “a thing in a world.” Each function of a in an order is an integrity of a , while at the same time being another thing open to a like analysis. McGilvary, who died the year Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* were published (1953), wrote that a thing “‘has’ characters in the way in which a family ‘has’ members,” and is thus a “college” of relational characters.⁸⁹ For Buchler the “identity” of a complex is the “continuous relation” that obtains between the collection of *all* its integrities and *any* of its integrities.⁹⁰ More simply, we might say objective relativism holds that to discriminate something *is to identify it*, and when identified it will be something that obtains in multiple orders of relations and may have different properties in them. A unity that was the same everywhere, its properties entirely independent of relations, cannot obtain. Each complex is in an order and *is* an order—or, as Cohen put it, a system. With no simples and no Whole, analysis of a complex's locations never terminates, but yields a partly determinate result in each order, none of which has non-ordinal, non-contextual priority. Right or wrong, whether compatible with naturalism as the Columbians thought or not, that is what a consistent objective relativism must hold.⁹¹ While Cohen did not formulate it completely, he had all the pieces before anyone else.

⁸⁹ McGilvary, *Toward a Perspective Realism*, 31–32.

⁹⁰ Buchler, “Notes on the Contour of a Natural Complex,” in *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, 215–16.

⁹¹ Lawrence Cahoon, *The Orders of Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The components of one of twentieth-century realism's most intriguing innovations, and one of American philosophy's unique doctrines, received its fullest early exploration from Cohen. In 1913–18 he expressed the ideas that a decade later were named "objective relativism" by Murphy (1927), endorsed the year of Cohen's death by Nagel (1947), expressed by Randall repeatedly (1939, 1946, 1958), and systematized by Buchler (1966). In addition to his impact on jurisprudence and philosophy of history, Cohen does in fact have a systematic philosophical legacy.

It is hard not to think of Cohen as a lesser Peirce. This is not to say that he was as brilliant or original, but that his interests, breadth of thought, irascibility, and tragedy are Peircean. It is telling that Cohen was the first to collect Peirce's work in a readable form. Like Peirce he was a philosopher of logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences who interpreted them in a realist fashion but applied the lessons learned to other fields, non-reductively. Cohen's pluralism, and his conceptions of polarity and indeterminateness, are clearly Peircean. Cohen was not the system-builder Peirce was, but then Peirce's "system" is rather unsystematic, "a very snarl of twine," as he himself wrote. Peirce's intent was systematic, but his thousands of pages have to be integrated by the reader or editor. Likewise, Cohen the systematic philosopher must be reassembled in the mind of the reader. Peirce and Cohen each invented ideas that others used to greater success. Each was difficult, more or less impossible to work with. Each had a disappointing career. Peirce had been to the academic manor born. Cohen was an immigrant devoid of pedigree. But each in his own way was a "stray dog among the philosophers."

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