

Editor's Preface

This is the second of three volumes of writings by G. A. (Jerry) Cohen that have been collected and edited after his death in 2009. The first brought together previously uncollected essays in political philosophy,¹ and the third will include lectures and other writings on the history of moral and political philosophy.² This one combines philosophical and nonphilosophical writings of a more personal nature, which depart from the strictures of formal academic prose.

As a consequence of this departure, every chapter of this book should be accessible to nonphilosophers as well as philosophers and should engage non-academics as well as academics. There are extended stretches of first-person narration—of, for example, Cohen's first trip to India, his time as a student at McGill and Oxford, and his interrogation of his apparatchik Uncle Norman during a visit to Prague as a young man. They make it clear what prompted Thomas Nagel to describe Cohen as a “wonderful raconteur” in a review of his earlier, narration-rich book, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*³ The more philosophical writings collected here are also unforbidding. The topics are of general interest: on the truth in conservatism, on who can condemn terrorists, and on the essence of bullshit. Moreover, rather than being enmeshed in the intricacies of highly developed academic controversies, these writings explore relatively uncharted territory, as in the case of his essays on conservatism and terrorism, or follow the trail of a single pioneer, as in the case of his essay on bullshit.

The book opens, in Chapter 1 (“Isaiah's Marx, and Mine”), with a tribute to his teacher and mentor Isaiah Berlin, written for a festschrift that was published in 1991. Cohen provides an account of his time at Oxford as a B.Phil. student under Berlin's guidance in the early 1960s. He also describes their differing views on the person and convictions of Karl Marx.

Chapter 2 (“Prague Preamble to ‘Why Not Socialism?’”) was written for delivery as introductory remarks to a lecture on socialism in Prague in 2001.⁴ It traces Cohen's loss of belief during the 1960s in the actually existing communism of the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern Bloc and offers an apology, in both senses of the word, for the earlier persistence of that belief.

¹ *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice*.

² *Lectures on the History of Moral and Political Philosophy*.

³ Nagel, “Getting Personal,” p. 6.

⁴ Visa difficulties prevented Cohen from making it to the Czech Republic to deliver this lecture.

Chapter 3 (“A Black and White Issue”) provides a terse, dispassionate defense of the academic boycott of apartheid South Africa. It was originally published in 1989 in a periodical for faculty and students at the University of Oxford.

Chapter 4 (“Two Weeks in India”) is a slightly abridged version of Cohen’s nearly contemporaneous reflections on a journey through India in 1993. Fifteen years later, Cohen wrote to some editors at university presses to express an interest in publishing this:

I attach a peculiar item, being the travel diary (or whatever you want to call it) that I wrote about my first trip to India, which was in January 1993. I originally circulated it privately, around that time, and many people urged me to try to have it published, because they found the narration gripping. I suppose the most illustrious person who thought it should be published was Amartya Sen. But I was firm in my mind that I did not want to publish it, because there’s so much stuff in it about other people that they might not want known.

The years go by, things sink into people’s past, and I have changed my mind about publication. I’m now very keen to publish it. . . . I would make not many changes: just eliminate the most egregious bits, people’s-sensitivities-wise, and add a few explanatory footnotes and an epilogue.

Cohen’s account of India is the nonphilosophical highlight of this volume. His remarks on poverty and begging are unforgettable, as are various vignettes of encounters with strangers. Upon my first reading shortly after it was written, I was struck by the way it gave me a wonderful vicarious sense of what it is like to be Jerry Cohen: the blooming, buzzing insights and perceptions; the empathy, intensity, and fascination; his sense of the ridiculous; the *joie de vivre*. At the time of his death, Cohen had not yet found a publisher for this manuscript and therefore had not yet made the changes he mentioned in the above correspondence. In preparing this manuscript for publication here, I have tried to eliminate passages that people he encountered on this trip might find upsetting to discover in print.

Chapter 5 divides into two parts. The first part, entitled “Deeper into Bullshit,” was originally published in a festschrift for Harry Frankfurt in 2002.⁵ Having declared it “too speculative,” but I suspect also for reasons of space, Cohen withheld publication there of the second part, entitled “Why One Kind of Bullshit Flourishes in France,” which I am pleased to have the opportunity to publish here. The overarching title of this chapter—“Complete Bullshit”—is the name Cohen chose for his computer file that brought Parts I and II together.

⁵ In his “Reply to G. A. Cohen” in the same festschrift, Frankfurt remarks that “Cohen’s essay is, so far as I am aware, the first significant attempt either to criticize or to extend my work on bullshit” (Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, eds., *Contours of Agency*, p. 340). This work of Frankfurt’s was later repackaged as a little book, *On Bullshit*.

Chapters 6 (“Casting the First Stone”) and 7 (“Ways of Silencing Critics”) ask who does and who does not have standing to condemn those who commit acts of terrorism and other apparent wrongs, where this question is not meant to be settled simply by a determination of whether the acts under investigation are in fact morally justified. Rather, the answer will also depend on such things as whether those who condemn terrorism are themselves responsible for the injustice that provides the terrorists with their cause, or whether they have committed atrocities as bad as those of the terrorists whom they condemn. Chapter 6 is the published version of a lecture to the Royal Institute of Philosophy in London in 2005, and Chapter 7 consists of previously unpublished further reflections that were prompted by the writing of that lecture.

Chapter 8 (“Rescuing Conservatism”) is the most outstanding philosophical essay of this collection: an original, rich, and finely wrought set of meditations. It offers a defense of the “small-c conservatism” of valuable and valued things.⁶ This was the last work of philosophy that Cohen brought to a sufficiently finished state to publish. In late March of 2009, he sent it to the editors of a festschrift for T. M. Scanlon.⁷ The version published here differs from the festschrift version insofar as it restores his references to All Souls College that were present in several earlier drafts but replaced, at a late stage, with references to a fictional liberal arts college.⁸ As a consequence of his elimination of these references to All Souls, Cohen also omitted a brief section entitled “Identity and Tradition” from the festschrift version. That discussion is published here, for the first time, as Section 5 of Chapter 8.

Cohen was prompted to articulate the case for conservatism in response to a proposal that his college accept outside sources of funding. He was later persuaded to eliminate references in the paper to the imperative to preserve All Souls unchanged. The fear was that such talk would expose his defense of conservatism to ad hominem mockery as a parochial concern bound up with an elite establishment of which he was a member. I have nevertheless chosen to restore the references to All Souls here in order to reproduce the paper as Cohen had conceived it throughout most of its gestation and to convey some of the personal roots of his conviction. My decision to do so has been made less difficult by the realization that I am thereby preserving a thing of value that might otherwise be lost. It is also made easier by the availability of the alternative festschrift version, which advances the more disinterested case.

Chapter 9 is Cohen’s Valedictory Lecture, which marked his retirement in 2008 from his Chichele Chair in Social and Political Theory at All Souls. It re-

⁶ As he makes clear in this essay, Cohen remained adamantly opposed to the “large-C Conservatism” of the British Conservative Party and the political Right more generally.

⁷ R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman, eds., *Reasons and Recognition*.

⁸ Almost all of these changes occur in Section 2, which is entitled “Keeping Valuable and Valued Things As They Are, and Accepting the Given.”

turns to the Chapter 1 narration of his philosophical development and fills out the chronology in both directions—back to his first encounter with philosophy as a child in Montreal, and forward to his time as a lecturer at University College London. The prepared text of that lecture is published here. The only known recording of that lecture, by Maris Kopcke Tinture as a member of the audience, has been posted on Princeton University Press's Web page.⁹ Cohen shared a CD of this recording, plus the text, with some friends who had been unable to attend the lecture itself. These came with the following cover letter:

I am sending you a CD that records most of my May 1, 2008 Valedictory Lecture.

Some points:

1. Eight minutes in the middle of the lecture were not recorded. So the second major track of the CD presents material that begins eight minutes later than the material at the end of the first track. The missing words are in the Valedictory Lecture text, which I am also sending. But PLEASE don't read the text, apart from that unrecorded part, except when listening to the CD, because the text is much less funny unspoken. And there are also ad-libs away from the text on the CD.
2. On the other hand, if I may continue in instructional mode, please don't listen to the CD without following it in the text. I say that because the CD audio is not always clear, and the text makes clear what's being said.

The last two chapters of this book are embryonic drafts of two unfinished papers, which I include in this volume after consultation with the family. Please bear in mind while reading these papers that neither is close to what it would have been if Cohen had been able to bring it to completion.

Chapter 10 ("Notes on Regarding People as Equals"), which Cohen drafted in 2006 and revised in 2008–9, contains, in his words, "preliminary reflections, many of them barely half-baked," on the question of what it is to regard another as one's equal. He sketches a Hegelian answer to this question. These are, as his own title indicates, notes rather than an essay in more finished form.

Chapter 11 ("One Kind of Spirituality"), which Cohen began to write three months before his death, is even less finished. In correspondence, he described it as so "raw" that he "would never dream of giving it" as a talk in its present form. Cohen also wrote that he "would not publish this without further explanation of what is meant." In conversation he mentioned that he was not sure that the word "spirituality" was the appropriate one to capture the notion he was trying to express, which was that one can feel blessed in a manner that should be understood as neither deity-affirming nor merely metaphorical.

⁹ <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9886.html>.

Even in their unfinished state, however, these two papers shed light on Cohen's "Hegelian Prelude" to Chapter 8, on conservatism.

The title of this book is drawn from the second sentence of that prelude, which opens as follows:

Hegel says that "Spirit" achieves freedom when the subject finds itself in its own object, so that "it is at home with itself in its own otherness as such."

This essay explores modes of finding oneself in the other. I am not here interested in the characterization of that condition as freedom, not because that is an unimportant aspect of Hegel's claim—it *is*, after all, his claim—but just because I fry other fish here. The conservatism that I defend is Hegelian to this extent: in each of three cases that I shall distinguish, namely, that of accepting the given, of valuing the valuable, and of valuing the valued, the subject is at peace with the object.

The title also resonates with a sentence in "One Kind of Spirituality": "Since there is no God for the relation of celebrating (or sacrificing and so on) to be in relation *to*, but it is a sentiment fraught with relationality, it can find its completion only in relation to the world and to other human beings." The theme of finding completion in relation to the world of other human beings recurs in many of the other essays in this volume: for example, in the focus on interpersonal justifiability in "Casting the First Stone" and "Ways of Silencing Critics," in his Hegelian understanding of what it is to regard another as one's equal, and in his encounters with various others that he conveys in his account of his two weeks in India. This theme is also captured in the very title of Chapter 1: "Isaiah's Marx, and Mine." And of course, in his philosophical writings outside the four corners of this book, Cohen found himself—his philosophical bearings, his theoretical commitments, and his distinctive voice—through a remarkable series of engagements with the thoughts of others: not only Marx, but also his contemporaries Nozick, Dworkin, and Rawls. Through his engagement with them, he reached the same heights.