Jewish Philosophy and the Academy

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HERBERT and STEPHANIE NEUMAN
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Contents

Toward a Comprehensive View of Jewish Philosophy: The Middle Ages and the Modern Era

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It is both a most intricate and exciting endeavor for the historian of philosophy to try to penetrate the central ideas and grasp the particular ways of raising problems that are specific to the philosophic tradition he studies, and to formulate, on this basis, a view of this tradition presented as an integral entity.

The very fact that the Jewish philosophic tradition emerged and developed in a close relationship with the Greek and Arab philosophic traditions in the Middle Ages, as well as with the European tradition in modern times, renders particularly relevant the task of revealing the internal foundation on which the unity of Jewish philosophic thought rests. Is Jewish philosophy merely an assimilation of foreign ideas and their adaptation to a Jewish outlook, or is it an autonomous and self-sufficient historical-philosophical phenomenon? Because an article of this length cannot provide an exhaustive answer to the question, I shall try to highlight only the principles that underlie the approach to dealing with it.

1

Genuine history of philosophy is impossible either as doxography or as an autonomous science; genuine history of philosophy is possible only as a self-consciousness of philosophy, as an awareness of its own "I." In its history, philosophy perceives itself, and also perceives its fundamental problems and ways of solving them. It becomes aware of itself as an indivisible organic entity with nothing obsolescent or irrelevant in it, where the ideas of any philosopher who belongs to a given tradition are ever alive and relevant, since it is only when combined, that these ideas make up the "I" of the tradition.

A philosopher's ideas can engage in a dialogue with notions and ideas of our own and can be understood only if we are able to single out and correctly formulate the ultimate premises from which this thought proceeded. Only this can ensure that the ideas of the past are understood. At the same time, a dialogue is possible only if there exists some common problem that all the parties in such a dialogue seek to solve. If the history of philosophy is conceived as such a dialogue of philosophers, and is viewed as the "I" of philosophy itself, we shall develop an understanding of philosophy as a consistent and integrated process of the advance of thought; its unity is maintained by the unity of the fundamental philosophic task to be fulfilled, while its homogeneity is ensured by the intrinsic continuity in the development of ideas geared toward the fulfillment of the task.

Therefore, if we want to understand any philosophic tradition as integral and homogeneous, we should try to identify the fundamental philosophic problem that had given rise to the tradition, and whose development constituted the effort to solve the problem; we should follow the uninterrupted and interrelated succession of attempts at solving the problem that formed the tradition. How can such an approach be applied to the history of Jewish philosophy?

2

Philosophy is the quintessence of the spirit of a people. The unique and particular features, the aspirations of a people, that both reflect and determine its historical destiny, are conceptualized in philosophy. Therefore, the fundamental philosophic task of the tradition that a people develops is to express conceptually the universal and continuing aspiration of the people's spirit.

In this context, a fundamental trait of the Jewish people's spirit that we should concentrate upon is, in my opinion, the historical and ethical character of experiencing being. Apparently Jews were the first to have formed the notion of the uniqueness of a historical process where the past (revelation) and the future (God's Kingdom on Earth) are of special significance and value. However, it is not only past and future that are characterized by ethical undertones, but the present as well: the course of being, the vicissitudes of the Jews' historical destiny, depend on how they abide by the Law and how faithful they are to it. Human ethics are of no less significance in determining the course of being than is divine omnipotence. The God of the Jews is a living God who directly reacts to the deeds and actions of His people.

This is the most important feature of the Jewish people's spirit,

which is essential for understanding its philosophy. Philosophy is the endeavor to understand and interpret, to encompass in integrated knowledge, the universe of being. A distinctive feature of Jewish philosophy is the injection of ethics into being: the category of being does not exist without the categories of will, power, force, and freedom, and it may be interpreted only through the latter (but not vice versa). Philosophy is not feasible without the notion of continuity of being; however, the ontological continuum for Jewish philosophy is first and foremost, and predominantly, an ethical continuum. The aspiration to understand the continuum of being as ethical continuum is, in my opinion, the fundamental task of the Jewish philosophical tradition; it constitutes its foundation and its unity.

3

To be fulfilled, this general philosophic task must be rendered concrete; in other words, some general pattern of solving it must be formed. In the history of the Jewish philosophic tradition we are able to discern two major periods with two different ways of dealing with the fundamental philosophic task corresponding to them; these are the Middle Ages and the contemporary period.

In the medieval approach to solving the fundamental problem of Jewish philosophy, the ontological continuum is perceived as emerging from divine essence, thanks to the act of God's will; it includes the world and man. Man is microcosmic; he combines the divine and earthly worlds. Man's free will constitutes the last inalienable element of this approach. The free and omnipotent will of God and the free will of man are two opposite categories that must be harmonized; the tension between them constitutes the main contradiction of Jewish medieval philosophy and the principal motivating force in its development. The free will of God creates the continuum of being and, consequently, includes man with his free will. However, to remain free, man's will must be autonomous; while such autonomy (which should be understood in the ontological sense as well) hinders continualization of being. Such is the central and basic problem, and the attempts at solving it produced a wide range of medieval Jewish philosophic doctrines.

The limitations of an article rule out any detailed analysis of all the nuances in the attempts to solve this problem in medieval philosophic doctrines; therefore I shall dwell only upon the key questions. An unavoidable consequence of being concise is a high degree of sketchiness, but I adopt this manner quite deliberately.

God constitutes the prime foundation of the continuum of being of

all the philosophic systems elaborated by medieval Jewish thinkers. Apparently, Philo of Alexandria was the first philosopher to have suggested that the prime foundation of being must be ontologically absolutely transcendental to being: it is the transcendence of God that makes it a genuine prime foundation, absolutely established and firm. However, the prime foundation must also be immanent to being. Since immediate ontological immanence is impossible, the gap between God and the world is filled by the act of creation. The category of creation is thus introduced into philosophy and rationalized. The immanence of God as the prime foundation of being in the world also introduces the notion of ethics, for creation, undoubtedly, should be perceived as an ethical act of divine will, while the transcendence of God to the world is described in terms of ontology. Thus two opposite relations of the prime foundation of being to being—that is, transcendence and immanence—may be conceived without a contradiction.

It is clear, however, that transcendence and immanence are not two relations that differ from one another, but two facets of the same relation between God and the world. In other words, the descriptions of God's relation to the world in the language of ontology and in the language of ethics must ultimately be identical. Philo succeeded in establishing such identity only in the notion of Logos: Logos expresses the unity of the creative activity of divine forces, divine omnipotence, and divine goodness. Beginning with Saʿadiah ben Joseph, medieval Jewish philosophers attempt to solve this problem in terms of the category of divine essence. Until Hasdai Crescas, ontological language (the problem of the unity of divine essence, in negative and positive theology) is used to express the transcendence of God to the world, while the language of ethics (creative divine will, goodness of divine essence) serves to express God's immanence. But since God is as much transcendental as He is immanent to the world, the problem of the identity of divine will and divine essence inevitably emerges.

An important aspect of this problem is that the divine will must be applied to some object (matter) that is external to the divine will and essentially different from it. At the same time, this object of divine will cannot have any other source but the divine essence. Thus, a single divine essence must give rise to two essences opposed to each other: divine will, and matter. While Philo still viewed matter as the ultimate principle of the world alongside the divine cause, Saʿadiah refused to recognize them as things of the same order. Ibn Gabirol made a deliberate attempt to solve this problem: he tried to trace both divine will and matter to the category of a single, infinite,

absolutely transcendental, divine essence. However, the solution he proposed generated perhaps just as many contradictions as it solved. After Ibn Gabirol, Jewish philosophy abandoned all attempts to establish the identity of ontological and ethical descriptions of God's relation to the world: even such thinkers, standing poles apart, as Ha-Levi and Maimonides agreed that this is something utterly impossible.

Another central problem for all medieval Jewish philosophers was matching the idea of the free will of man with the idea of divine omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness. The free will of God and the free will of man must be integrated in a way that does not contradict the notion of divine justice. The complexity, if not impossibility, of solving this problem is exemplified by the fact that many medieval Jewish philosophers abandoned the soil of philosophy and opted for the language of theology. In those cases when attempts were made to deal with the problem by purely philosophic means, there was always the dilemma of choosing one of two ways: either recognizing the self-sufficing character of human will stemming from the immediate ethical sense that distinguishes between evil and good and forms from this knowledge the notion of God's goodness, thereby confining the absolute freedom of His will to the limits of moral law (Joseph al-Basir); or preserving the absolute freedom of divine will, and recognizing the freedom of human will merely as a psychological phenomenon, ontologically accepting the determined nature of human actions (Crescas).

As medieval Jewish philosophy developed, it became progressively clear that the identity of ontological and ethical languages in the description of God's transcendence and immanence cannot be established. This resulted in the emergence of Crescas's philosophy, which, in my view, occupies a special place in the history of medieval Jewish philosophy. Crescas abandons the principle of the identity of ontological and ethical languages in favor of the latter: he believes that the issues of God's transcendence and immanence to the world, freedom of divine will and human will, may be described exclusively in ethical categories, while the problems that were traditionally formulated in the language of ontology were of no decisive significance. Divine essence is the prime foundation of being, as an absolute fullness of goodness and joy. God's immanence to the world is perceived as an incessant emanation of goodness (i.e., of being) from divine essence. This emanation is not a necessary process, but a consequence of divine will, which is perceived as the will for goodness. The free will of man is the will for felicity and joy, which Crescas declares to be primary sensations that do not depend on anything.

Crescas does succeed in solving the problem that proved a stumbling block for all medieval Jewish philosophers: God's immanence and transcendence to the world are described in the category of ethics. However, an inevitable consequence in the case of Crescas was his view of the application of divine will.

4

The specificities of medieval Jewish philosophy that I have tried to emphasize stand out even more graphically when compared with medieval Arabic philosophy. References to the closeness of the two traditions have grown commonplace; however, this closeness has never crossed a certain border.

An inevitable logical consequence of the development of Mu'tazilite doctrine in Arab philosophy was Ash'arism that refused to recognize freedom of human will and the good character of the divine will. On this point, Jewish philosophy did not follow the logically necessary (for the Mutakallimūn) conclusions drawn by Ash'arites, and set itself in opposition to the Kalam whose ideas it had successfully assimilated up to the point where they ran counter to its basic propositions. While Jewish philosophers throughout the Middle Ages tried to preserve the idea of creation as a free act of divine will, practically all Arab philosophers were doing exactly the opposite, interpreting creation as a necessary and ontologically determined process. When creation was perceived as an act (as was the case in Isma'ilite philosophy), the category of divine essence was removed from the framework of the philosophic system. It is not by chance that medieval Jewish philosophy did not assimilate the ontological ideas of Arab mysticism; of all medieval Arab philosophic schools, Sufism is the least compatible with the notion of free divine and human will.

5

Medieval Jewish philosophy never solved its central problem of harmonizing free, creative, divine will with the free will of man responsible for his actions. The principal cause of this failure was the bias toward interpreting divine will as an ontological as well as ethical category, as the foundation of moral law and, at the same time, as the primary source of being. It is obvious that, for the sake of further development of Jewish philosophy, the category of divine essence has to be redefined in principle.

The present stage of Jewish philosophy, which began in the eigh-

teenth century, is far from over. A new approach to solving the fundamental problem of Jewish philosophy took shape during this period and its potential by no means has been exhausted.

The fact that the problem of harmonizing two autonomous wills, divine and human, has been eliminated, while the problem of ethics focuses exclusively on man, makes for a type of solution that differs in principle from the medieval approach. Moses Mendelssohn perceived creative divine reason as identical to supreme moral perfection; but such an approach is possible only after the content of the main categories of philosophy is revised. The ontological continuum is now conceived as being self-sufficient, and as having its foundation in itself; the divine essence is no longer its prime foundation. Freed from its ontological function, it may be perceived as the expression of the ethical ideal, and play an exclusively regulatory role. The free will of man is not confronted by the free will of God the creator; man with his ethical norms finds himself face to face with the world.

The conception of the world as ethically necessary and justifiable, with man at its center, is the leitmotif of the quest unfolding at this new stage of Jewish philosophy. Hermann Cohen is one of its most vivid representatives; his philosophy views man's ethical consciousness as autonomous and independent. The possibility of conceiving being in the category of ethics is ensured by the correlation of these two realms; a necessary link exists between logical cognition of nature and ethical knowledge. Without the supreme principle of unity, such a link would be impossible; this unity rests on the idea of God. The future is of special value; it is in the future that ethical postulates and inferences are to be translated into reality. Therefore, ethical consciousness aspires toward infinity. The unchangeability of nature as the object of the realization of ethical norms, should correspond to this aspiration. In the future New Kingdom of justice, the ethical merges with the ontological; being does not contradict morality.

The aspiration to inject ethics into being as a triumph of the human ideal, as set forth by Cohen, at the same time expresses the continuing aspiration of Jewish philosophy. The new historical stage opens up new prospects. I feel that Jewish philosophy contains in itself, in its past and present, sufficient potential for fruitful development. Should this statement also be understood as a question addressed to the future? Life itself will provide an answer.