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International Philosophical Quarterly

International Philosophical Quarterly

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BRIEFER BOOK REVIEWS

Scriptural Pragmatism: Jewish Philosophy's Concept of Truth[1]

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IN HEBREW SCRIPTURES, in rabbinic literature and for most Jewish thinkers, "truth" (*emet*) is a character of personal relationships. Truth is fidelity to one's word, keeping promises, saying with the lips what one says in one's heart, bearing witness to what one has seen. Truth is the bond of trust between persons and between God and Humanity. In Western philosophic tradition, however, truth is a character of the claims people make about the world they experience: the correspondence between a statement and the object it describes, or the coherence of a statement with what we already know about the world.

As if divided by their dual allegiance to the traditions of Jerusalem and of Athens, Jewish philosophers often believe themselves forced to choose between the two meanings of truth, producing what we may call objectivist and personalist trends in Jewish thought.

Before the time of Descartes, the objectivists tend to be Aristotelians. They identify the created world of Scripture with the finite cosmos of Hellenistic philosophy and the spoken-words of Creation with the natural laws of the cosmos (*logoi*). They argue that the laws of personal relationship, revealed in the Torah, are particular instances of natural law and that, therefore, the religious conception of truth as fidelity is derivative of the philosophic conception of truth as correspondence to the natural world. Saadia Gaon exemplifies this approach, arguing that prophecy was necessary only to specify how Israel would enact the rational laws of the Torah.[2] While the greatest of the Aristotelians, Maimonides, so emphasizes the dichotomy between moral and natural laws that he prefigures some of the argumentation of the modern, or post-Cartesian objectivists. In his *Guide*, Maimonides claims that Adam's original intellect gave him the power to distinguish truth and falsehood (scientific knowledge), which degenerated, through his corporeal inclinations, into a power to distinguish good and evil (merely moral knowledge).[3] This suggests that the revealed laws of personal relationship may serve conventional, moral functions which the philosopher considers secondary to the task of uncovering cosmic truths. Pushing this dichotomy one crucial step further, Spinoza introduces modernity into Jewish thought: identifying the Torah with religion and thereby separating the conventional functions of Torah from the pursuit of scientific knowledge

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[1] Originally prepared for *A Handbook of Jewish Theology*, edd. A. Cohan and P. Mendes-Flohr (New York: Scribner's), forthcoming.

[2] See Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, S. Rosenblatt, trans. (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1948) passim.

[3] *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I. Ch. 2, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969): pp. 24-5.

of the natural world.[4] Modernity imposes on modern Jewish thinkers the burden of proving that Judaism, as a distinct faith, offers anything more than a collection of particular, conventional rules of behavior.

Personalists tend to defend the faiths of Israel against what they consider the corrosive effects of philosophic criticism. Their arguments are often political as well as philosophic: grounded in the observation that philosophers may condemn Jewish particularity in favor of a professed universalism that actually serves the political or economic interests of competing social groups. They argue that truth is not correspondence between a statement and the world, but between a statement and the intentions of the person who uttered it. Yehuda Halevi, for example, argues that the truths of philosophic reasoning are merely hypothetical, or relative to the conditions of knowing which give rise to them.[5] They are reliable only when the philosopher controls those conditions: for example, in mathematics. In natural science and for moral knowledge, however, certainty is acquired only through experience: the experience of the senses and, ultimately, direct experience of God, in mystical life and prophecy. These experiences appear only within the particularity of Jewish history and are recorded only within Jewish tradition.

In appearance a traditionalist, the personalist draws on neo-Platonic sources which eventually exert a radicalizing influence. From Al-Ghazali to Bruno and Descartes, the neo-Platonic tradition exhibits increasing distrust of mediated knowledge and a preoccupation with cognition and epistemology, as opposed to tradition and hermeneutic. For Western and Jewish philosophers, the effect is to unite personalists and objectivists in the vain search for non-traditional foundations which has characterized modern thought until the twentieth century.

For students of Wittgenstein, "foundationalism" is the attempt to discover rational foundations for rational inquiry.[6] In practice, that definition is too restrictive. Since humans always seek reliable premises for action, foundationalism may be defined more broadly as the human response to a loss of trust in traditional systems of behavior. The Athenian philosophers mistrusted mythological traditions, but soon replaced them with traditions of rational inquiry grounded in the moral universe of the Athenian *polis*. On certain issues, the Jewish Aristotelians and neo-Platonists replaced trust in rabbinic authority with trust in the Athenian traditions. The technological revolutions of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, however, and the socio-political revolutions of the Reformation and the new industrial age, encouraged mistrust of all finite systems of knowledge and behavior, Athenian as well as rabbinic or Scriptural. If most Jews were insulated from that mistrust until Emancipation, Jewish philosophers knew it even before Spinoza. Cresca's personalism and Luria's *kabbalah* may be seen as attempts to protect Israel's faith against the corrosions of European skepticism.[7]

[4]Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. R. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951) passim, esp. Ch. XIII-XV.

[5]Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, trans. H. Hirshfeld (New York: Schocken, 1964).

[6]As Richard Bernstein puts it, "Descartes' *Meditations* is the *locus classicus* in modern philosophy for the metaphor of the 'foundation' and for the conviction that the philosopher's quest is to search for an Archimedean point upon which we can ground our knowledge" (from *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1983) p. 16.

[7]See Hasdai Crescas, *Or Adonai* ("Light of the Lord") described in H.A. Wolfson, *Cresca's Critique of Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ., 1971); and, for introduction to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria (Ha-Ari), Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Ch. 7 (New York: Schocken, 1954).

In the context of modernity, neither personalism nor objectivism offers lasting protection against skepticism. Each contributes to an untenable dichotomy between world and personhood and, thus, a confusion of the *object* and *ground* of truth.

Truth is not an everyday concern. We go about our daily business trusting that whatever the past has taught us about the world will continue to work in the future. If curiosity stimulates our investigating things in the world we have not yet seen, it is not because we seek to "know the truth." We simply want to discover more instances of what we already know, reconfirming and deepening our convictions. The pursuit of truth is a signal that something has gone wrong: that the world is not behaving according to our expectations. We find ourselves unable to conduct daily affairs and, at least momentarily, have lost faith in our ability to act in the world. The pursuit of truth is an effort to recover that faith. The simple object of this pursuit, the *object of truth*, is the world. We want to recover knowledge of an environment that suddenly seems beyond our control. Certainty about the world, however, is always grounded in a prior trust of the persons who have taught us what the world is and how to act in it. We want first, therefore, to recover the *ground of truth*, which is trust in persons and in the knowledge they provide us. The pursuit of truth is the effort to recover ground and unite it with object.

Personalists and objectivists err by devoting exclusive attention to either ground or object. Objectivists declare that truth lies in the world, that is, that we may solve our problems by examining our environments. The world is mute, however, until interpreted by a system of knowledge, and we have no interest in such systems until we gain trust in the persons who teach it. Personalists declare that truth lies in fidelity to such persons and trust in what they teach. We would not care about truth, however, if we did not have reason to doubt our teachers; knowledge is meaningless independent of its application to experience.

Since the nineteenth century, Jewish thinkers have looked to the critical philosophy of Immanual Kant as a way out of the dialectic of personalism and objectivism. Kant is aware that the dialectic is ill-founded and devotes his work to overcoming the separation of the ground and object of truth.[8] Unfortunately, his efforts remain within the framework of a neo-Platonic personalism. No matter how earnestly his disciples desire contact with the objective world, they understand that world only as a modality of human personality: an object of intention and desire, instead of a source of new experience. Hermann Cohen, for example, declares that "truth is the accord of theoretical causality (cognition) with ethical teleology (ethics)."[9] Both cognition and ethics, however, belong to the activity of the human mind, which means that Cohen identifies ground with object rather than seeking their resolution by way of human interaction with an external world. Cohen's truth belongs neither to the world nor to traditional knowledge, but only to the cogito. Buber seeks to bring the Kantian tradition into the world;[10] Rosenzweig seeks to reconnect it, as well, to traditional knowledge.[11] Neither succeeds fully, because Kant's restrictive premises betray their efforts.

Generated out of an appreciative critique of Kant, Charles Peirce's pragmatism offers Jewish thinkers a theory of truth more faithful to Jewish practice: that is, to the methods

[8]See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K. Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1965); see "Introduction," and "Antinomy or Pure Reason."

[9]*Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. S. Kaplan (New York: Ungar, 1972), p. 410.

[10]See, e.g. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Scribner's, 1970).

[11]See, e.g., Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. W. Hallo (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

of problem solving most emphasized in rabbinic tradition.[12] For the pragmatist, the pursuit of truth is a three-stage process of inquiry, stimulated by the experience of behavioral failure and completed only through the successful correction of that failure.

The first stage of inquiry is the attempt to recover the ground of truth. This means that the inquirers seek to recover lost trust in some tradition of knowledge and in the persons who present that tradition. For Emmanuel Levinas, this stage finds its paradigm in the Israelites' relation to God at Mt. Sinai. According to the midrash in *Tractate Shabbat* (88a-b), the Israelites were forced into accepting a Torah whose benefits they could not appreciate. Like the angels who declared "we do and *then* we understand" (*naaseh V'nishmah*: Exodus 24.7), the Israelites had to enact the commandments before comprehending them, trusting God before trusting themselves.[13]

In Scriptures, the first stage of inquiry is indicated by two uses of the term "truth" (*emet*). The first is *truth as trust*: as in "the laws of truth"[14] (*torot emet*) (Neh. 9.13). This means laws in which the people Israel could trust (following Ibn Ezra on Gen. 24.49: that truth used in this way displays its derivation from the term "faith" (*emunah*)[15]). The second is *truth as fidelity to one's word*: as in "these are the things you shall do: speak truth, each man to his neighbor" (Zech. 7.9) which means to say what one means (Radak)[16] and, thereby, to inspire confidence (Rashi on "men of Truth," Ex. 18.21).[17] But confidence requires testing against experience.

The second stage is the attempt to recover the object of truth. This means that the inquirers examine their problematic experience, to make as much sense as they can of it within the limits of their present knowledge. Philosophers call this examination descriptive science; for rabbinic tradition, it is *mada*, an aspect of "knowledge of the ways of the world" (*derekh erets*). Since the Enlightenment, objectivists and personalists have vied for control of this activity: the one arguing that rabbinical authorities have no business interfering with the procedures of science; the other arguing that natural science threatens the autonomy and sanctity of Jewish life. Again, the argument rests on a confusion of ground and object of truth.

By definition, the object of truth lies beyond the ken of traditional knowledge: inquiry is seeded in the failures of extant knowledge to anticipate this object. Descriptive science is, therefore, a tool of discovery: a means of presenting the inquirers' data—patterns of sense perceptions—they have not previously encountered. For traditional Judaism, recognition that the Lord is God signals the inquirers' conviction that no knowledge is complete in itself and that, therefore, new discovery is always possible. Problematic experience is the inquirers' encounter with the finitude of creaturely knowledge and, therefore, with the majesty of the Lord God. Behavioral failure is the means through which God shows His creatures that they do not fully understand His

[12]See *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vol. V*, eds. C. Harteshorne and P. Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ., 1934-5), as interpreted by John E. Smith, *Purpose and Thought, The Meaning of Pragmatism* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1978).

[13]Emmanuel Levinas, *Quatres Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1968), pp. 69ff.

[14]"good laws," in the Jewish Publication Society edition of *The Writings, Ktuvim, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (Philadelpha, 1978). All future references are to this edition.

[15]The Biblical commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) appear in the traditional Hebrew volumes of *Mikraot G'dolot*.

[16]Radak is the acronym for the Biblical commentator Rabbi David Kimkhi (1160?-1235?).

[17]Rashi is the acronym for the most famous traditional Biblical commentator, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (1040-1105). A translation of his commentaries appears in *Pentateuch*, M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silberman, trans. (New York: Hebrew Pub.).

word. On the other hand, descriptive science cannot in itself provide knowledge of the problematic object of truth. Knowledge of the object means knowledge of how to interact with the object, or how to act in the world. The data offered by science are mere generalities, which delimit the ways in which the inquirers may interact with the object, but which cannot themselves legislate specific choices of action. Such choices are defined by principles available only in the inquirers' tradition of knowledge.

In Scriptures, the second stage of inquiry is indicated by references to *truth as correspondence to object:* as in "you shall investigate and inquire and interrogate thoroughly. If it is true, the fact established. . ." (Deut. 13.15). In testifying to the truth of a matter, witnesses offer data whose significance is disclosed through authoritative interpretation: "if the charge proves true, the girl was found not to have been a virgin, then. . ." (Deut. 22.20, cf. Rashi). The consequences of this evidence are disclosed only in a third stage of inquiry.

The third stage is the attempt to reapply object to ground. This means that the inquirers at once define the problematic experience in the language of traditional knowledge and modify that tradition to accommodate the new object. Contemporary philosophers call this stage hermeneutic or interpretation; in rabbinic tradition, it is *midrash*. Midrash is a mediating activity, which perfects tradition by putting it to the test of experience, reuniting object and ground as matter and form.

Midrash is what objectivists like Saadia call rational verification of traditional faith, except that reason is practical, not abstractive, and the meaning of faith is not disclosed prior to the activity of verification. Midrash reveals the truth which traditional knowledge receives from its original source but does not reveal until the completion of particular acts of inquiry. Truth is the response traditional knowledge offers to particular crises of knowledge. Immanent in the tradition, it does not make itself known until behavioral failures signal the need for previously revealed truths to be modified.

In Scriptures, the third stage of inquiry is indicated by references to *truth as the final result of inquiry:* " 'The Lord, The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in mercy and truth' " (Ex. 34.6). "In truth" means "faithfully rewarding those who perform His will" (Rashi), "in truth" fulfilling His word (Ibn Ezra). "The Lord is a true God, a living God and king of the world" (Jer. 10.10): the true God can fulfill His word, because He lives, while humans die (Rashi) and because He fulfills promises, while the stars remain mute (Radak).

Truth, say the rabbis, is the seal of God. But to declare that God is truth is not yet to have received God's truth, which comes, ultimately, in the end of time, or piecemeal, at the end of each act of inquiry. It is, rather, to declare one's conviction that the failures we suffer are God's means of correcting our incomplete knowledge of His word and that by repairing our failures we come to know His word more deeply.