
Epistemological Tensions in Heschel's Thought*

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Some thirty years ago, after delivering one of my first academic lectures on the philosophical impulses in Heschel's thought, I was approached by a friend, a professor of Jewish thought at a prominent Israeli university. Her reaction to my lecture was surprise: "Somehow, I don't think of Heschel as a philosopher, nor do I read him for his philosophy." "How then do you read him?" I countered. "For inspiration, for spiritual enrichment," she replied. "Much as I would read the Psalms on a Shabbat afternoon, or *Sefer Aggadah*." "So you read him as a sophisticated Jewish Kahlil Gibran?" I countered, and I added, "I'm convinced that Heschel would be terribly distressed to hear your reaction."

I recall that conversation whenever I teach Heschel. I doubt if today, I would respond any differently than I did then, though for Kahlil Gibran, I would probably substitute any one of the many books on spirituality that abound today. But the tension reflected in our exchange continues to haunt me.

To my students, I pose the issue this way. When I teach Heschel, I can assume two very different poses. One of these I call my "*Seudah Shlishit* mode." Daylight is waning, I have eaten and drunk in abundance, I have worshipped and rested, I feel mellow, I sing the haunting melodies prescribed for the occasion, the Messiah is about to arrive, Heschel's words flow through and around me, I abandon my critical faculties, I let myself go, and I emerge spiritually enriched.

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The second mode I call my “Monday morning, Columbia University, Department of Philosophy mode,” where I am teaching a Heschel text. (I do not actually teach in the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University, so this is a fantasy mode for me.) Now I bring to bear the full range of my critical, academic apparatus, everything that I have learned from other philosophers who have written on the same issue. My purpose is to conduct a rigorous philosophical inquiry into the statement, to extract its meaning, subject it to dispassionate criticism, evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and locate it within the context of other positions on the issue in the works of the philosophical canon.

Many of our contemporaries read Heschel because he enables them to extend their *Seudah Shlishit* mood throughout the week. They do not come to Judaism for rigorous thinking. If anything, there is a profoundly anti-intellectual thrust to their Jewish search.

Heschel feeds that search, and not only because of his astonishingly evocative use of the English language. My Kahlil Gibran reference was obviously a put-down, more an expression of my anger than anything else. Heschel is primarily a superb, insightful, religious phenomenologist. He is at his absolute best when he traces the contours of the Jewish religious experience, the back and forth of it, from the inside. No one, for example, has written more insightfully on just what it feels like to pray as a Jew, on the struggle to balance the conflicting claims of structure and spontaneity, on the tension between the statutory liturgy and the demands of the heart, than in the first four papers collected in *Man's Quest for God*.

But Heschel would claim that this model of inquiry is not simply his idiosyncratic literary style. It is in fact at the very core of his understanding of what a theological inquiry is all about. The goal of that inquiry is not to end up with a thoroughly coherent set of abstract, neatly packaged conclusions, dispassionately presented. For Heschel, theology is testimony, one believing Jew's very personal statement on how he finds meaning in his own life experience.

Early in *God in Search of Man*, Heschel distinguishes between conceptual thinking and situational thinking. The first is an act of reasoning, designed to enhance our knowledge about the world. The second involves an inner experience where the thinker himself is under judgment, where we are engaged in an effort to understand issues on which we stake our very existence. The attitude of the conceptual thinker is detachment; of the situational thinker, concern. And then, “One does not discuss the future of mankind in the atomic age in the same way in which one discusses the weather” (p. 5).¹ But what then does that portend for the instructor of the Columbia University class in philosophy who reads Heschel in the context of the discipline of philosophy?

Again and again, in the early chapters of both *Man is Not Alone* and *God*

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1955).

in *Search of Man*, Heschel warns the reader that speculation is a betrayal of religious awareness. The encounter with God is “. . . responsive, immediate, preconceptual, and presymbolic.” And “(A)ll conceptualization is symbolization, an act of accommodation of reality to the human mind.” (*God in Search of Man*, p. 115).

By proceeding from awareness to knowledge we gain in clarity and lose in immediacy. What we gain in distinctness . . . we lose in genuineness. The difference becomes a divergence when our preconceptual insights are lost in our conceptualizations, when the encounter with the ineffable is forfeited in our symbolizations. . . . (p. 116)

My use of the term “betrayal” may be a bit strong, but note his terms “accommodation” and “forfeiting.” Religious thinking is “. . . in *perpetual danger* [emphasis mine, N.G.] of giving primacy to concepts . . . and to forfeit the immediacy of insights, to forget that the known is but a reminder of God. . . . Concepts, words must not become screens; they must be regarded as windows” (p. 116).

But what then is the role of speculation in theology? In those opening pages of *God in Search of Man*, Heschel answers that it is to provide “a critical reassessment of religion. . . .” He quotes Kant to the effect that religion should not be exempt from critical inquiry. That criticism must extend to all religious statements, for religion is liable to “. . . distortion from without and corruption from within.” And therefore, “(th)e criticism of religion, the challenge and doubts of the unbeliever may . . . be more helpful to the integrity of faith than the simple reliance on one’s own faith” (p. 10).

But this generous evaluation is immediately qualified. Philosophy cannot fulfill its legitimate function “. . . if it acts as an antagonist . . .” of religion. Unfortunately, it tends to become “the perpetual rival” of religion. “It is a power that would create religion if it could. . . . (I)t has tried its talent at offering answers to ultimate questions and has failed.” It remains “. . . a method of clarification, examination, and validation, rather than a source of ultimate insights” But it must also “. . . refute the claim of philosophy when it presumes to become a substitute for religion” (pp. 11–12). But what if the process of “validation” leads to the rejection of that primordial awareness as untrustworthy and therefore of its ensuing claims as questionable or even false?

What a thin and tenuous line philosophical speculation must tread! Is it indeed possible to be critical, to examine and validate religious claims, without assuming, at least for methodological purposes, a dispassionate stance that, to the believer, far too readily becomes antagonistic?

A striking instance of how Heschel deals with the tension between religion and philosophy, between situational thinking and conceptual thinking, lies in a brief passage in *God in Search of Man* (pp. 120–122). Here he raises the possibility that our preconceptual awareness of God may be purely subjective, that God may have no ontological reality beyond our own minds.

Heschel is fully aware of the magnitude of this issue. It is no less than the central issue in any religious epistemology. Are theological claims falsifiable? Are they verifiable? Are they factual? Or are they great poetry, purely personal expressions of what I feel or would like to believe? How do we establish their veracity? How do we distinguish between veridical claims and palpable illusions or wish-projections? This is nothing less than the core issue in any religious epistemology, and the literature of philosophy of religion on this issue is voluminous.

But there is not a hint of a reference to this accumulated body of writing on this issue here. Heschel's answer to the question is simply to assert that in fact, our awareness of God's reality is much more veridical than the ontological claim that "God is." "The truth . . . is that to say, 'God is' means less than what our immediate awareness contains. The statement 'God is' is an *understatement*" [emphasis Heschel's]. Calling upon the Kantian analogy, Heschel asserts that belief in God's reality is not a matter of first possessing the idea of a hundred dollars and then claiming to possess the dollars on the basis of the idea. The order is the reverse: first, we actually have the dollars, then we count them. There may be errors in the counting, but the dollars are real.

In contrast to metaphysics where reasoning comes first and the question of God's reality second, "(t)his . . . is the order in our thinking and existence: The ultimate or God comes first and our reasoning about Him second."

I have struggled with this passage for many years. Why the discomfort that assails me whenever I study it? First, it is the position itself. I am personally uncomfortable with the notion that our experience of God is self-verifying; that position has led to more disasters in the name of religion than we can count. But further, there is no intrinsic reason for Heschel to fall into that position. He remains a solid, traditional religious empiricist and his empiricist predecessors have elaborated many suggestive ways of avoiding the perils of self-verification.

Even further, as a thinker who is primarily concerned with evoking classical Jewish ways of reaching God, he has over two thousand years of Jewish thinking to support that endeavor. The Bible, for example, espouses a profoundly empiricist way of attaining an awareness of God's presence in the world. For the Bible, would you encounter God? Then simply look—look at nature, look at Israel's historical experience. Of course, looking by itself is not that simple. It demands a complex act of knowing what to look at, what not to look at, and how to interpret and understand what one sees when one looks. Deuteronomy 4, for example, is a classic text which provides a rich biblical foundation for that enterprise. But these are the issues that all religious empiricists debate and they have evolved strategies for handling them. To take but one example, I and many others have found John Wisdom's seminal paper "Gods"² particularly insightful and helpful.

² Frequently anthologized, e.g. in Ronald E. Santoni, ed., *Religious Language and the Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968).

But what troubles me even more is Heschel's method, his failure to provide the broader philosophical context within which the issue arises, his failure to refer to the reams of literature on the issue, to lay out in a formal way the various options, to trace the implications of all of these positions, and more important, to suggest the potential pitfalls of his own position. What I miss here is the critical distance which any philosopher must bring to his own claims.

In effect, Heschel dismisses the question. If you doubt the veracity of your experience, you have betrayed it. What then is the proper role of the philosopher in regard to this central issue? How does it pursue the process of subjecting religious claims to dispassionate criticism? How, indeed, if as in this case, speculation must simply acknowledge its inherent inability to assail the original claim? Here is a classical example where “. . . the criticism of reason, the challenge, and the doubts of the unbeliever . . .” could contribute in a genuine way to “the integrity of faith,” yet Heschel simply dismisses the challenge.

Heschel's claim, here, is that the critical stance should not be accepted uncritically, that it must be turned on itself, that the believer must step outside and beyond the critical stance by “regressing” to an earlier state which recaptures that primordial awareness of God's reality. Or, in other words, that the epistemological track we pursue to gain the large body of our knowledge of the world is totally dysfunctional when applied to God. We then have two choices: the first is to shun that path in the first place; the other is to pursue that inquiry to its end only to realize that it results in a complete impasse. We then retrace our steps and locate ourselves in that pre-conceptual, pre-symbolic situation where our primordial awareness of God's reality is accepted as factual.

In fact, Heschel's position here is not unfamiliar. Allow me to present an outline of a very similar position by the late twentieth-century French Catholic existentialist, Gabriel Marcel. (On what follows, the reader may wish to consult this author's doctoral dissertation, *Gabriel Marcel on Religious Knowledge*.³)

Marcel's religious epistemology is based on a series of fundamental distinctions: between what he calls a “presence” and an “object”; between a “mystery” and a “problem”; and between “primary reflection” and “secondary reflection.” The broader distinction is between “profane knowledge” and “sacred knowledge.”

Marcel defines his terms with precision: An “object,” as its name implies, is some reality that lies outside of me, etymologically “thrown before me.” Objects present us with “problems” that are before me in their entirety. Problems are in principle solvable, precisely by “primary reflection,” by dispassionate, critical inquiry.

In contrast, a “presence” is a reality in which I am involved, which I can-

³ Neil Gillman, *Gabriel Marcel on Religious Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980).

not observe objectively. Presences yield mysteries, issues in which I am caught up, in which the distinction between “in me” and “before me” loses its meaning. The echo of Heschel’s distinction between conceptual and situational thinking is striking. Mysteries do not lend themselves to dispassionate inquiry, because we can never achieve the required distance from the issue to enable us to study it objectively. Mysteries can never be solved, but rather, only invoked, or acknowledged in awe, reverence, wonder, or piety—all Marcel’s terms. Again, note the echo of Heschel’s language.

The acknowledgment of the mystery, for Marcel, requires an act of “secondary reflection,” a reflexive reflection, one which turns primary reflection on itself, which recollects, recaptures, reprises, or reconquers a primordial experience, an epistemological moment that predates primary reflection and its critical stance.

As a broad definition for presences and mysteries, Marcel suggests any reality which eludes the subject-object structure: Being, my self, knowledge itself, and evil, for example. With these distinctions in place, Marcel outlines two distinct epistemologies, one designed to deal with problems, the other, with mysteries. In contrast to Heschel, all of metaphysics, Marcel claims, is essentially an act of secondary reflection. And the “sacred knowledge” yielded by metaphysics, when applied to religious issues such as God, later becomes “religious knowledge.”

Note the difference in treatment: terms are defined clearly and are used consistently; the twin problems of verification and falsification are explicitly raised, the hazards of each position are acknowledged, and Marcel’s own conclusions are presented with full awareness of the problems they raise.

Still another version of the position is suggested by Paul Ricoeur’s suggestive term, “second” or “willed naivete.”⁴ Ricoeur was one of Marcel’s most perceptive and critical students. Ricoeur’s “second naivete,” Marcel’s “secondary reflection” and Heschel’s “ontological presupposition” are all different terms for the same epistemological twist, the step whereby we recapture an original, primordial awareness through and beyond criticism.

Is anything lost in exercising that epistemological step? Sure, answers Ricoeur, and he uses Heschel’s very term, “immediacy of belief,” though for Heschel, that immediacy is not at all lost, but rather regained. And Ricoeur continues: “But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men, aim at a second naivete in and through criticism.”

Heschel’s ultimate claim is that theology is personal testimony, and he uses his phenomenological analyses of the experience of God, of prayer, of ritual living to buttress his very personal sense of how these moments acquire meaning for him. In the process, he invites his readers to plunge in and do it themselves.

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 351.

I acknowledge his genius at accomplishing this not at all insignificant task. He remains, for me, the most insightful of contemporary Jewish theologians. But in the final analysis, and I acknowledge that this may very well be my problem, not Heschel's, I always expect something more from him, something which he rarely provides. My discomfort is both with substance and with style, with Heschel's flouting of the ways in which philosophers have traditionally pursued their inquiries. To which, of course, Heschel can legitimately reply that he does not feel bound by those traditional methodologies, and that particularly in dealing with religious claims, those methodologies are not only inadequate but even misleading.

But then, it is the responsibility of the philosopher to explicitly justify and legitimize his idiosyncratic method, particularly when it departs from conventional philosophical usage. To be fair to Heschel, he does attempt to do just that in those pages on situational and conceptual thinking, but it remains the responsibility of his students to evaluate whether or not that methodological commitment has been carried out consistently.

For this student, on this issue, the jury is still out. My suspicion is that despite his protestations to the contrary, Heschel was not at all concerned with subjecting his insights to dispassionate, critical inquiry. His earliest training was in mysticism, and it is the mystical experience that retains his ultimate allegiance. And mystics, as we know full well, are rarely inclined to mistrust their intuitive experiences.