

The writings of Professor Heschel have had a growing impact upon modern religious thought. In this essay Professor Fox, who wrote on "Heschel, Intuition, and Halakhah" in our Fall 1960 issue, discusses some recent works by Professor Heschel. Dr. Fox is Professor of Philosophy at Ohio State University and a member of TRADITION's Editorial Board.

HESCHEL'S THEOLOGY OF MAN

"Who is man?" In the very phrasing of the question Professor Heschel directs our attention to a number of crucial issues.* In asking "who," and not "what," he presupposes a certain kind of answer. Man must be a person and not a thing. He must belong to a special order of being, for there is nothing else on earth that we can think of or refer to as "who." And clearly, since we place the highest value on personality, this man whose nature we seek to know belongs not only to a unique but to a most dignified realm. His humanity is something specially precious, something to be cared for and cherished.

All this might seem to be a set of commonplaces, and in less skillful hands it might have become just that. But Heschel is not frightened by this danger, for his roots are in the Jewish tradition, and as he views it, *"The teaching of Judaism is the theology of the common deed. The Bible insists that God is concerned with everydayness, with the trivialities of life.*

The great challenge does not lie in organizing demonstrations, but in how we manage the commonplace." It is the merit of Heschel's writing that he can transform the commonplace with such skill that we see all of its marvels. He helps his readers share his own sensitivity and teaches them to respond to ordinary events and ordinary people with wonder, with reverence, and with a profound sense of personal renewal. He has often commented on the traditional Jewish practice of reciting a benediction before partaking of food or drink. In the benediction on drinking water we express thanks to God "by Whose word everything was created." To see all the marvels of creation in a simple glass of water is a high achievement indeed. When we not only see but also respond with awe and gratitude for the water itself and for all that it mirrors, that is an even higher achievement. A major goal of Heschel's literary effort over the past twenty years has been just this — to teach us to see and to

* *Who Is Man?*, by Abraham J. Heschel, Stanford University Press, 1966.

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respond, to discover and be grateful for the marvels that surround us at every moment.

While he wants us to respond even to the glass of water, his greatest aim is to teach us to understand and appreciate man, to value human personality as we find it in our own selves and as we discover it in every other man. Heschel sees in the devaluation of man, the greatest danger to contemporary society. Where man is reduced to a thing, a tool, or a number, nothing of genuinely human value can be preserved.

In *The Insecurity of Freedom** he has collected twenty essays published (with one exception) during the last ten years. Though these are occasional pieces with such diverse titles as, "Religion in a Free Society," "Israel and the Diaspora," and "The Vocation of the Cantor," they are all, as the subtitle of the volume suggests, "essays on human existence." In *Who is Man?* Heschel has developed his theme in a more sustained way. However, even here his method is not that of the analytic philosopher. He rarely constructs a formal argument, and even more rarely does he engage in what contemporary philosophy would call "analysis." His aim is kerygmatic, i.e., to proclaim his own insight with such force that it is convincing, and in language fashioned with such skill and care that his readers share his vision. His method assumes that one who has caught the vision needs no further arguments,

and one who has not caught the vision will never be persuaded by argument alone. There are some who find Heschel's rhetoric inflated, and others who are suspicious of his tendency to express a profound insight in a pithy epigram. Such critics miss the point of Heschel's approach to the problems about which he writes. His strategy is to appeal simultaneously to mind and heart, to engage the intellect and the emotions; for he seeks more than the assent of the understanding; he aims at the transformation of feeling, the awakening of sensitivities, the heightening of imagination. Heschel is a poet, as well as a philosophical theologian — a poet with a mission, the saving of man from self-destruction. His unusual style is ideally suited to the purposes for which it has been fashioned and to the audience to which it is addressed. His own words make the point most successfully:

Life must be earned spiritually, not only materially. A good conscience is the invention of the devil. Man knows more than he understands. He senses more than he is able to say. Reducing knowledge to the limits of understanding is to stultify our intelligence. To maintain that everything we know we are able to understand, that everything we sense we are able to say, is an invention of idiots. *Intellectual embarrassment*, awareness of our inability to say what we sense, is a prerequisite of intelligence.

And what cannot be said discursively must be evoked with sympathetic imagination. For,

* Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays On Human Existence*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.

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Sensitivity to the mystery of living is the essence of human dignity. It is the soil in which our consciousness has its root, and out of which a sense of meaning is derived. Man does not live by explanations alone, but by the sense of wonder and mystery. Without it there is neither religion nor morality, neither sacrifice nor creativity.

In his numerous epigrams Heschel often succeeds in penetrating the heart of an issue in very few, but memorable, words. Concerning the moral base of human relations he says, "No man has a place in this world who tries to keep another man in his place." Of the relationship of institutional Christianity to Judaism he observes that, "The children did not arise and call the mother blessed; instead, they called the mother blind. Some theologians continue to act as if they did not know the meaning of 'honor your father and your mother'; others, anxious to prove the superiority of the church, speak as if they suffer from a spiritual Oedipus complex." The pathetic state of contemporary Jewish education is painfully expressed in the statement that, "We say that we have given the Bible to the world. Have we not given it away?" It is by the power of this kind of writing more than by any formal arguments that Heschel consistently makes his strongest and most persuasive appeal to his readers.

In these two books Heschel is concerned with developing a philosophical anthropology, or more accurately, a theology of man. This has been a central theme in his work for many years, as even a

quick glance at the titles of his various books will indicate. Taking his stand against the reductionism of some contemporary theories of human nature, Heschel opposes vigorously every effort to understand man as merely an animal, or merely a biochemical organism. Our greatest need is "to think of man in human terms," for anything less misrepresents and falsifies. When we confront man in his own terms we come to see that he cannot be legitimately understood on the model of animals. For even the smallest effort at self-reflection shows us that unlike other living creatures that simply are what they are, man "is a problem intrinsically and under all circumstances." He is a problem because he is capable of measuring the actual against the ideal, what he is against what he ought to be.

The glory and the burden of man is that he is never free of responsibility for the development of his own humanity. And every man knows this, however vaguely. In his self-confrontation, man becomes aware of his possibilities and these, in turn, imply his responsibilities. He cannot merely rest easily, being what he is, for he is driven to reflect on what is demanded of him, to aspire toward the realization of the human ideal. "To claim to be what I am not is a pretension. To insist that I must be only what I am now is a restriction which human nature must abhor. The being of a person is never completed, final. The status of a person is a *status nascendi*. The choice is made moment by moment. There is no standing

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still.”

The central characteristic of man, as Heschel understands him, is that he lives in consciousness of obligation, that he is laden with responsibility. “I am commanded—therefore I am.” This is the key to human nature. Without duty, obligation, commandment, there is no true humanity. Because man is fully aware that he is not his own creator, he recognizes a debt to the source of his being. This insight is as old as the normative tradition, as old as the Biblical story of the first man. In that story the first words spoken to man are commandments, divine commandments. First, “God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it . . .’” (Gen., 1:28). When he spoke to man again, “The Lord God commanded the man, saying ‘Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it . . .’” (Gen., 2:17). It is only in being commanded that man discovers who he is, only in the recognition of debt and duty that his humanity is defined.

The rabbinic tradition saw this point clearly when it commented on the verse which follows the sin of Adam and Eve. “Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked.” In explaining this verse the Midrash teaches that the reference is not to their physical nakedness. “They had been given a single commandment and they were stripped bare of it.” In rejecting the commandment they rejected

the very idea of being commanded, and at that moment they were stripped of their humanity. Heschel’s representation of man is directly in line with this old rabbinic tradition.

But what is it that is asked of us, what are we commanded? Though Heschel is known to be an observant Jew, he does not, in these books, resort to the classical answer. Instead of simply saying that the 613 divine commandments are a summary of our duties and obligations, Heschel tries to penetrate into the inner meaning of this version of human responsibility. Of course, the ideals of kindness, generosity, love, and the whole collection of Biblical virtues provide the norm. However, he is concerned with the inner state of man that underlies that norm and makes it vital and meaningful. Abandoning pat formulas, Heschel invokes certain categories which have become familiar to us from his earlier works. To begin with we must have a sense of indebtedness just for the fact of our existence. This leads to an awareness of dependence, to the knowledge that “man is not alone,” to the recognition that without God man is incomplete. Freed of our illusions of self-sufficiency, we can see our world with new insight.

In spite of our pride, in spite of our acquisitiveness, we are driven by an awareness that something is asked of us; that we are asked to wonder, to revere, to think and to live in a way compatible with the grandeur and mystery of living. . . . All that is left to us is a choice — to answer or to refuse to answer.

Concretely, Heschel calls for a

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human life which fulfills its own potentialities by being always on the side of the angels. Our reverence for the marvel which is man should lead to active battle against poverty, racial discrimination, ignorance, greed, and the whole set of familiar social ills. We enter on these battles aware of our own limitations, and yet fully convinced that we are called and that we must answer. This is, literally, our vocation, a vocation which daily awaits our response. "I am afraid of people who are never embarrassed at their own pettiness, prejudices, envy, and conceit, never embarrassed at the profanation of life. A world full of grandeur has been converted into a carnival. . . Social dynamics is no substitute for moral responsibility."

What exalts man above all other creatures is that he is needed, needed by God. This is not a blasphemous limitation on God's perfection, but rather an indication that He has given a special role to man. Says the Psalmist, "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; but the earth hath He given to the children of men." Man alone is witness on earth to divine truth. Man alone can bring into being the kind of society which is worthy of being called the kingdom of God on earth. Heschel follows rabbinic teaching in viewing man as cosmically creative, as God's partner in the daily renewal of the world. The Torah sets down the path and sets forth the teaching, but only man can breathe life into the fixed patterns of practice. In the exalted moments of awe and reverence for all creation, in the discovery of the

marvels that surround us, man first comes to know himself. Only then can he truly devote himself to that service of humanity which is the highest and most vital service of God. This is the true meaning of faith. Religion is not a set of dogmas, though these have their proper place. "Jewish faith . . . is not a formula. It is an attitude, the joy of living a life in which God has a stake. . . . Faith comes with the discovery of being needed, of having a vocation, of being commanded."

Given this conception of man, it follows that he is supremely valuable. This is expressed by Heschel in two ways, either by speaking of man as divine, or as sacred. And these are, of course, two sides of one coin. Our humanity is a revelation of divinity, for at his best man is truly a mirror in which we can see reflected the image of God. Where else in the world do we find the delicacy and sensitivity which characterize man at his best? Where else do such qualities as love and generosity manifest themselves? At this highest level of his possibilities man is not continuous with animal nature, but his "human being is a disclosure of the divine. The grandeur of human being is revealed in the power of being human." Every man is sacred because this divine potential is present in him, and by "sacred" Heschel means "ultimate preciousness."

It is important, finally, to note that the personal categories which Heschel sets forth are not mere passing episodes of human self-exaltation. Heschel sees these qua-

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lities of personality as basic structural features of reality, to be taken as seriously as traditional metaphysical categories. He holds that we cannot hope to understand the world by way of classical ontologies alone, nor will reflection on substance and cause unlock the door to the inner mysteries of existence. In his view, the dignity of man and the preciousness of human life are the elements of a metaphysic that is more profound, more perceptive, and more revealing than classical first-philosophy. Heschel is an existentialist in the best sense of the term, namely, in affirming that the deepest dimensions of human existence reveal the most fundamental aspects of ulti-

mate reality.

It might be said, with justice, that in these books Heschel has created nothing new; he has simply restated the classical Biblical-rabbinic doctrine concerning man. Yet, his contribution is of enormous worth, for he has found a way to recast these old teachings so as to give them renewed relevance and contemporary power. The confirmed, doctrinaire sceptic is unlikely to be affected by these books; but those to whom the religious view of man is a live option will be as deeply moved by Dr. Heschel's rhetoric as they are instructed by the scope of his learning and the luminosity of his mind.