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IS RELIGION A SEPARATE LANGUAGE GAME?

INTELLIGIBILITY

Recent articles by Professors Kasher¹ and Schlesinger² have raised some serious questions regarding the intelligibility as well as the justification of Jewish religious belief. In what follows I shall attempt to show

- 1) that even on the basis of Professor Kasher's assumptions (some of which are rather doubtful) the propositions of the Jewish religion can be shown to be quite intelligible.
- 2) the analysis offered by Professor Schlesinger as to the problem of the skeptic and the suggestion that establishing cognitive claims in religion does not involve any peculiar difficulty, are not valid. I shall show that there is a crucial dissimilarity between the acceptance of initial premises and basic rules of inference required in other domains of knowledge and what is required in accepting the propositions of Judaism.

Professor Kasher's criteria of intelligibility for declarative sentences are, in effect, a liberalized version of the verifiability principle of meaning. He states that sentences in order to be intelligible, must either be directly intelligible, be observation sentences, or be linked to observation sentences by means of rules of correspondence. It is not clear what he means by "directly intelligible." His logical positivist bias, however, is apparent. He says: "When a statement is directly intelligible (within a given set of circumstances) we can directly determine the truth value of the claim it puts forth" (p. 90). This is obviously a characterization of the scientific method of discourse, its method-

ology and criteria of significance. This seems to be presented as holding for all declarative sentences, any cognitive statement or proposition making a truth claim. Applying these criteria to the thirteen *Ikarim*, Kasher finds them unintelligible.

Kasher assumes that the term cognitive is synonymous with empirical and scientific. However, one can justifiably maintain that observation can give the whole truth concerning a certain system if one assumes the premise that there are no unobservable entities. But, as Ewing asks, "Why should facts be limited to those potentially present to sense perception? If God does exist, then this is assuredly by far the most important fact about the Universe."³

I would define "cognitive" differently.⁴ An utterance to be cognitive must present a primary conceptual content which is capable of being the content of an assertion. By "primary conceptual content," we mean the complex of concepts, ideas or images symbolized by the sentence which is in some way essential to an English speaking person's understanding of the sentence in its context. This primary conceptual content is partly a function of the lexical meanings of the separate words composing it and partly a function of the structure of the sentence or its syntax and grammatical arrangement. The utterance must seek to evoke a belief that this content is true, i.e., makes an assertion which is true or false.

By this criterion, sentences such as, "The soul or self of man survives his bodily death" and "There exists a God who is infinite spirit and who created the world" are perfectly intelligible and cognitive. The criteria suggested by Kasher should more correctly be termed "criteria of *empirical* meaningfulness" which distinguish scientific sentences or theories from a non-scientific, but meaningful theories.

Kasher asserts: "When a statement is directly intelligible, we can directly determine the truth value of the claims it puts forth." Is this true? Suppose that every body and object in the universe is constantly expanding though it is impossible to detect this because all bodies, including our measuring rods, expand at the same rate. Or consider the statement, "There exists a perpetual motion machine." This statement appears to be directly intelli-

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gible. Yet how can we determine its truth value?

Kasher should qualify his conclusion by saying that he does not find the *Ikarim cognitively* meaningful. For he has explicitly stated that the "various disciplines are defined each by its use of its own methodology, are autonomous and self-contained from the point of view of content" (p. 95). Thus, just as ethical and aesthetic theories must be judged in the light of the methodological principles appropriate to their disciplines, so should religious theories be judged in the light of their own methodological principles. Kasher should, therefore, be willing to acknowledge that religious propositions may be intelligible within their own domain. (He goes so far as to say, "we may have here two different concepts of truth" p. 97.) Indeed, this has been a popular way out for many theologians who have argued that religious language has important uses other than the informative.⁵

If, on the other hand, Kasher is working on the assumption that religion does not constitute a separate "language game," but in effect occupies the cognitive realm and purports to make truth claims, how does he justify his statement that "the whole problem of conflicts between religion and science is a pseudo-problem?" (p. 97). The language of religion abounds with statements about history and the world which have and do affirm what science denies and vice versa. Consider *Ikar* 8: "That the entire Torah in our possession today is what was given to Moses, our teacher." This would imply that the Pentateuch existed in its present form around 1200 B.C.E. Or the statement in Genesis, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter and day and night shall not cease," which seems to deny the possibility of a future ice age or the possibility of the sun running down.

If, for the sake of argument, we accept Kasher's assumptions how do the *Ikarim* fare when judged by these criteria? To place before us, once again, the scientific view of the relationship between a theory and the empirical realm, consider the following metaphor used by Hempel:⁶

A scientific theory might therefore be likened to a complex spatial network: Its terms are represented by the knots, while the threads

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connecting the latter correspond, in part, to the definitions and, in part, to the fundamental and derivative hypotheses included in the theory. The whole system floats, as it were, above the plane of observation and is anchored to it by rules of interpretation. These might be viewed as strings which are not part of the network but link certain points of the latter with specific places in the plane of observation. By virtue of those interpretive connections, the network can function as a scientific theory: From certain observational data, we may ascend, via an interpretive string, to some point in the theoretical network, thence proceed, via definitions and hypotheses, to other points, from which another interpretive string permits a descent to the plane of observation.

This is pretty much Kasher's picture with Hempel's rules of interpretation taking the place of Kasher's correspondence rules. Just as scientific inquiry is not concerned with isolated sentences but with entire theories, so too Judaism must be considered as an entire theory to be accepted or rejected as a totality. To paraphrase Kasher, an inquiry into the meaning of a particular religious assertion or individual *Ikar* must take place within the general theoretical framework of which the assertion is a part.

Judaism, in its cognitive aspects, is a metaphysical hypothesis which selects certain categories from experience such as love, purpose, creature and creator and with them attempts to explain all of reality. It is an hypothesis which introduces an abstract entity, God which is connected by definitions and by narratives in the Torah to the other propositions contained in the set of sentences which comprise the creed of Judaism. Among these propositions are: 1) *historical assertions*, e.g., "The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt;" 2) *expectations about the future*, e.g., "The Jewish people will never be completely destroyed;" or "The righteous dead will be resurrected;" 3) *explanatory assertions*, e.g., "Why does the world exist?"

These three types of propositions serve as the "strings" which link the entire hypothesis to the world and to experience. The important point is that these empirically anchored assertions confer intelligibility (according to Kasher) or a degree of empirical import (according to the present writer) upon the theory as a whole. Thus, it is not necessary that each individual *Ikar* be linked to the world. It is sufficient that they are logically

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connected to the complex of narrative in the Torah which, as a totality, is linked to the world. (Even in isolation it appears clear that *Ikarim* 12 and 13 are linked to the world and directly intelligible even by Kasher's standards.)

In comparing scientific and theological methodologies, Kasher states that the "crux of the issue is that in certain circumstances, when a theory is not in harmony with the facts, the scientist will discard the theory while "we are not aware of any Jewish theologian who maintains that our sacred scriptures contain false propositions" (p. 95).

Kasher is confusing the question of the factual or empirical significance of certain sentences and the question of the way in which certain beliefs are held. There are, without a doubt, states of affairs which are relevant to the confirmability or disconfirmability of religious statements. Pointless pain and suffering in the world, for example, is certainly evidence against the belief that God loves us. It is precisely for this reason that theologians seek to "explain" pain and suffering. And it is for this same reason that many people have, as a matter of fact, ceased to believe when confronted by events such as the Holocaust. However, the question of how much evidence is required for decisive falsification or disconfirmation (logically and rightly) is a separate one and a largely undetermined one even for science. Here, indeed, the method of religion may differ from that of science. We do not jeopardize the empirical import of religious assertions if we acknowledge that the special function and purpose of religious belief requires that the belief be retained long after it might have been abandoned as a scientific theory. For within the system of religion, persistence in belief and in the commitment—stance is considered a virtue. Much depends upon the individual's sense of loyalty. We cannot say in advance when belief should be given up. By contrast, scientific hypotheses are held in a highly tentative and provisional way. Every fact not explicable by the hypothesis becomes a challenge to create a better hypothesis. Beliefs about God, however, are not held in this way. Prior to the mind's relationship to evidence is its relation to God. These can be given up only through great anguish. Within the system of religious faith, therefore, there cannot be

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a provision for its abandonment. As a matter of fact, believers do forsake their beliefs under the pressure of counter evidence. Like science, therefore, religious assertions are relevant to and affected by the facts of the world. In religion, however, because of its different purpose, the mechanism of decisive or final falsification follows a different procedure than is followed in science.

SKEPTICISM

Professor Schlesinger does not attempt to solve the problem of skepticism in Judaism but merely to correctly state it. Essentially his thesis is that whatever difficulties exist in establishing the factual claims of the Torah do not arise out of any peculiarity attaching to their logical status. In this respect, they are no different from the claims made in other domains of knowledge. For, in the latter as well, we have to accept unquestioningly the "basic unproven and unprovable" first principles. The difference lies that in other domains "by innate inclination and continuous conditioning" we accept the basic premise while regarding religious propositions, the cultural climate no longer supports the conditioning needed for unquestioning acceptance.

Professor Schlesinger suggests that there is something weird about those who go about raising doubts concerning matters taken for granted by everyone such as the existence of other minds or the validity of inductive reasoning. Anyone actually plagued by these doubts who could carry them into everyday life would, he suggests, be regarded as emotionally unbalanced, and in need of therapy rather than an argument. This would fit in with the view held in some circles of Traditional Judaism that skepticism or the questioning attitude towards religious belief is an unnatural state of mind which calls for a *Musar shmoose*. But as Schlesinger himself acknowledges, philosophers raise these doubts "in order to illuminate the status of these assumptions" (p. 89). We are certainly much further advanced today, after Hume, in understanding the grounds upon which our knowledge rests and indeed, the limitations of knowledge and reason itself. It is important for us to know that empirical laws do not confer certainty; that causality is nothing more than

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constant conjunction. These doubts have sent thinkers off into new and often fruitful directions in attempts to ascertain the rational grounds of our assumed knowledge. While it is true that in our daily lives we continue to believe and to act on the belief that the sun will rise tomorrow, the person who deplors the unexamined life will remember that he cannot know these things with certainty. To the extent that he is a rational person, he will, nevertheless, seek to justify his beliefs and ground them perhaps in some argument from analogy or in the case of induction on some pragmatic basis.

It is wrong to infer from what Professor Schlesinger wrote, that the boy who returned from Volozhin with no questions was somehow better off than the one with the questions. To be rational is to ask the questions "why" and "how do we know?" Their successful resolution requires not the therapeutic dispelling of the question but an answer which justifies the belief in question. Are such answers available? I believe they are.

Professor Schlesinger's article discusses the knowledge of other minds and the problem of induction. The former is a substantive belief that most of us have that the other fellow has inner experiences and is a center of consciousness even as we are. A bit of reflection will show that I can never prove this in the sense that I can be certain of this belief. There is always the possibility that he may be a cleverly contrived robot. Confronted by this, I relinquish my certainty but seek different grounds to justify my now probabilistic belief. I can either develop an argument based on analogy or perhaps conclude that mind can know mind in some intuitive way.

An analogous development took place in connection with religious belief. When, after Hume and Kant, the proofs for the existence of God of natural theology were refuted, religious thinkers had to seek different grounds for their belief; grounds that would not confer certainty but perhaps a degree of probability. But as with the knowledge of other minds, the surrender in theology of old positions under critical reflection does not and should not lead to a relapse into unquestioning acceptance but to a new understanding of belief and its logical grounding.

The problem of induction is quite different. Here Professor

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Schlesinger is on firmer ground. This is not a substantive belief but a principle of empirical reasoning, a rule of inference. The question indeed arises: if all of empirical knowledge or science is validated by appeal to the canons of deductive and inductive reasoning, how are these canons of rationality themselves justified? Professor Schlesinger is quite correct that there is no higher court of rationality to which we can appeal this question and by which we can *validate* these principles. However, as Feigl has pointed out, use of the principles of deduction and induction can be *vindicated* by a pragmatic criteria, bearing in mind the aims of science.⁷ In short, this is the most effective method to be used by anyone who wishes to make correct predictions and keep such inferences adaptable to the accumulating evidence. In the words of Nagel, "The sole justification of the procedures of science lies in the specific solutions it offers to the problems which set it in motion."⁸ The principle of induction is thus not a piece of knowledge nor a proposition, but rather an operational rule. According to Feigl, it can be called the "hypothetical imperative: If you intend to predict correctly, use the method of simplest generalization on the basis of as broad an experiential background as you can secure."⁹ The purposes and aims of science or of the empirical enterprise generally are so clearly delimited that its basic criteria or principles of validity have attained practically universal consent. Furthermore, no plausible alternatives have, as yet, been offered to the principles of deductive and inductive logic.

The name of the game that science is playing is the game of the pursuit of knowledge. It is played by the rules of evidence—observational, inductive, testimonial, circumstantial, etc. It uses words such as "true," "false," "valid," "facts," "probability." If religion were a different game, then Professor Schlesinger would be correct in saying that whatever validating rules are basic to religion need not be justified other than by vindicating them in terms of the special aims and purposes of religion. However, as a matter of fact, the theologian purports to be playing the same game of pursuit of knowledge. For he too, by use of religious statements seems to want to *communicate* thought; uses arguments to *validate* or *warrant* something; thinks of his

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assertions as representing *facts* and *states of affairs*, not fictions or mere poetry.¹⁰ We do not say that the 9th *Ikar* is a meta-linguistic rule which serves to mark off the subject matter of religion. We assert that propositions contained in the Torah are true.

It would seem, therefore, that the cognitive claims of religion need be validated by the same criteria of rationality which are employed in the domain of knowledge since these, too, are truth claims.

Can this be done? Yes. But the formulation and defense of this answer will have to wait a subsequent article.

NOTES

1. Kasher, Asa, "Fundamental Assumptions for Discussions on Religion and Science," *TRADITION*, Vol. 10, No. 1.

2. Schlesinger, G. N., "The Problem of Skepticism," *TRADITION*, Vol. 10, No. 3.

3. Ewing, A. C., "Awareness of God," *Philosophy* 1965, p. 4.

4. See Frankena, W., "Cognitive and Non-Cognitive" and "Some Aspects of Language," in *Language Thought and Culture*, edited by P. Henle (University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 124 & p. 169.

5. An illustration of this is the approach of R. B. Braithwaite in his *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge 1955).

6. Hempel, C. G., *Fundamentals of Concept Formation in Empirical Science*, Foundations of Unity of Science, Vol. 11, No. 7, 1952 (University of Chicago Press), p. 36.

7. Feigl, H., "Validation and Vindication," in *Readings in Ethical Theory*, edited by W. Sellars and J. Hospers (Appleton-Century Crofts, Inc., N. Y., 1952), p. 667.

8. Nagel, E., *Principles of the Theory of Probability* (Foundations of the Unity of Science), Vol. 1, No. 6, p. 73.

9. Feigl, H., "The Logical Character of the Principle of Induction," in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, edited by H. Feigl and W. Sellars, p. 303.

10. This is essentially the argument posed by C. J. Ducasse to R. Demos who takes the same position as Professor Schlesinger in the symposium, "Are Religious Dogmas Cognitive and Meaningful?" Reprinted in *Religious Language and the Problem of Religious Knowledge*, edited by R. E. Santoni (Indiana University Press, 1968).