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## LINGUISTIC ISSUES IN A TALMUDIC DEBATE

The disciples of Shammai (1st century CE) maintained that first the heavens were created and then the earth; the disciples of Hillel, first the earth and then the heavens. Both gave reasons for their views. The disciples of Shammai based their arguments on the text: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." They cited the analogy of a king who made a throne. Only after the throne was ready did he make the footstool, in accordance with the text (Isaiah 66:1): "The heavens are My throne, the earth My footstool." The disciples of Hillel based their argument on the text (Genesis 2:4): "... on the day when the Lord made earth and heaven." They cited the analogy of a king who built a palace. First, he built the lower storeys and only then the upper, in accordance with the text (Isaiah 48:13): "Yea, My hands laid the foundations of the earth and My right hand spread forth the heavens." R. Yohanan stated in the name of the Sages: "In the context of creation, the heavens came first, in the context of completion, the earth." In the context of creation we read: "In the beginning God *created* heaven and earth"; in the context of completion: "on the day the Lord *made* earth and heaven." Said R. Simeon b. Yohai (2nd century CE): "I am surprised that these great minds differed over the order of creation. I maintain that both were created together like the pot and its lid." Said R. Lazar b. R. Simeon b. Yohai: "Father's view explains why the Bible varies the order of heaven and earth—to indicate that both are equal in importance." (Palestinian Talmud, *Hagigah*, II:1)

"On the day when the Lord made earth and heaven": the disciples of Shammai maintained that the planning (thought) was by night prior to the execution (deed) by day; the disciples of Hillel, that both planning and execution were by day. R. Simeon b. Yohai said: "I am surprised that these great minds—the disciples of Shammai and Hillel—could differ over the creation of heaven and earth. In my view, the planning was by day and the execution by twilight." (Genesis, *Rabbah* 12:14)

### I

The question naturally arises whether this ancient rabbinic debate over the primacy of heaven and earth is of more than antiquarian

relevance today. In my opinion, the talmudic sages were engaged in a timeless fundamental debate whose repercussions have reverberated through the ages and whose echoes can still be picked up in the current controversies over the nature of mind and matter, the primacy of nature or nurture, the relationship of thought and word, form and meaning, intention and deed. These controversies seem to surface most persistently in modern linguistics in the course of its characteristically wide-ranging inquiries into the physical, social, psychological, and philosophical aspects of language. The more I have delved into them, the more have I been intrigued to find points of contact between them and the talmudic discussion of which came first: heaven or earth?

## II

That the latter represented more than a local textual controversy can be seen from the fact that it was one of the questions that rabbinic legend credits Alexander the Great asking the Jewish sages<sup>1</sup> and from the fact that it formed the subject of debate between the two major opposing schools of talmudic tradition—the Shammaite and Hillelite. What is more, leading rabbinic teachers spanning five generations of mishnaic tradition, a period of over 200 years, figure in this debate. The pattern is strikingly Hegelian. We have the Shammaitic *thesis* that heaven was created first. This was the answer that Alexander the Great received from the sages of the Shammaitic school, presumably the earlier tradition. This was countered by the Hillelite *antithesis* that the earth was first. Both views are replaced by the *synthesis* proposed by the later teachers that heaven and earth were equal in importance. In addition, what was perhaps purely a cosmological debate about the order of creation is given a new dimension in a dispute between these same “great minds” over the primacy of thought or deed.

## III

Ostensibly the dispute was related to a discrepancy between Biblical texts. But there can be little doubt that the ideas the rabbis were wrestling with were part and parcel of the *zeitgeist*. Heavens became a concept describing not only the world of the spirits and astral bodies but also heavenly things in general, the world of the spirit, the architect’s plans and ideas,<sup>2</sup> as opposed to the earth, the material things of everyday life—the objective reality that can be seen

and touched. The earth was the substance, the heaven the inner principle, the form animating it. The respective analogies of the rabbinic preacher provide us with a further dimension to the ideas prompting the controversy or emerging therefrom.

The disciples of Shammai project the idea of God building first his throne and then his footstool, the disciples of Hillel, the image of the builder constructing the house from the foundations upwards, both figures being found in Isaiah. The former is God centered, stressing the world of ideals emanating from above; the latter is man centered, stressing that his needs are the purpose of creation and only on them can a superstructure of ideals be built. The later authorities express surprise that such an antithesis of views could prevail. It is quite clear to them that heaven and earth are two sides of the same total reality. The creation was unordered. It depends entirely on the context of discussion, the linguist might say "the level of description," as to which you consider first. Speaking of creativity, heaven is first; of the finished product, the object, earth is first.

#### IV

My primary aim is simply to bring to the attention of those involved . . . some of the little known work which has a bearing on their concerns and problems which often anticipates some of their specific conclusions. Questions of current interest will, however, determine the general form of this sketch; that is, I will make no attempt to characterize talmudic theorising as it saw itself but rather concentrate on the development of ideas that have reemerged quite independently in current work.<sup>3</sup>

I make here no apologies for reproducing the words of contemporary linguist Noam Chomsky, substituting the phrase "talmudic theorising" for "Cartesian linguistics" in the original. There was no such discipline as linguistics in the seventeenth-century world of Descartes, yet Chomsky does not hesitate to seek a parallel for his own theories in the dicta of long-dead scholars who would have been hard put to understand what he was talking about if they had come to life today. All this simply demonstrates how necessary it is for human beings to find inspiration for their ideas in the controversies of the past. We do not write history but rewrite it in our own image. Or perhaps there is a universal timeless bedrock to human reality.

#### V

Bearing all these qualifications in mind, we can surely bring the dispute that is still raging between the empiricists and mentalists

within the framework of the historic Shammai-Hillel controversy. The empiricist maintains that it is the study of the object as we observe it that comes first, the way we register its responses to the environment. The inductive approach, from the particular to the general, is uppermost. On the other hand, the mentalist proceeds from the inside, from the mind, from the unbuilt, unseen and as yet unmapped cognitive powers that govern the way we learn and act. Here the deductive-hypothetic approach, from the general to the particular, is uppermost. The empiricist is earthbound, describing actual behavior, mapping the mechanisms of stimulus and response of the object. Man himself learns through the process of stimulus and response (SR); his knowledge and competence is largely the product of response to the environment. His mind is a relative *tabula rasa* at birth. It is nurture not nature that is important, that is first.

Those who study linguistics are confronted by the now classic controversy between Chomsky and Skinner<sup>4</sup> over whether language learning can be reduced to an SR pattern or whether, as Chomsky maintains, there is a complicated cognitive device residing in the brain that determines how the human being will pick up language. Adapting the distinction made by a pioneer of linguistics and structuralism, Saussure,<sup>5</sup> between language (the *langue* of the group) and speech (the *parole* of the individual), Chomsky talks of competence and performance. Competence is the grammar in the brain. Any deviations from its norms in actual speech are to be blamed on the speaker's faulty performance.

## VI

The most extreme empiricist will not deny that the newborn comes into the world with certain *a priori* abilities, competence or program without which all learning would be impossible. Empiricism is also not to be equated with atheism or with denying the existence of mind. All it says is that the mind can only be explained in behavioristic terms. Otherwise it is a mysterious black box about which nothing can be known. This is no different from the contention of the rabbis that God can only be known through his works. We cannot know Him directly.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the nonreductionist behaviorists such as Mead<sup>7</sup> and Wittgenstein<sup>8</sup> contend that we know meaning through use, but we do not reduce meaning, experience, or mind to their manifestations.

There is a tendency today to abandon the fixed positions of the

empiricist and mentalist camps. No longer are we faced with a choice between the world of objects, tokens, and performance and that of concepts, types, rules, and systems. Both are part of the same total reality.<sup>9</sup> There can be no polarization, but, instead, a dialectic relationship. As Vygotsky, in his classic work on the relationship between thought and language, notes, concept formation itself is a movement constantly alternating between two directions—from the particular to the general and from the general to the particular.<sup>10</sup> The context will determine which aspect receives the greater emphasis.

## VII

Similarly, our attitudes to the theory and practice of Judaism will vary with the circumstances. Shammai stressed the preservation of the conceptual purity of the rules. The problems of performance were secondary. Hillel's starting point was performance—the actual earthly reality. Man could not be nourished on concepts. The structure of faith was built on earthly foundations. The changing needs of society were also God given and came first. In the beginning was not the logos, the word or the idea, not mind but matter, not thought but action, not heaven but earth.<sup>11</sup> Compromise is a good word in normative Judaism. It means bringing principles down to earth.<sup>12</sup> It is not synonymous with surrender. The disciples of Hillel eventually triumphed, but that did not disqualify the approach of Shammai in certain contexts.

Admittedly, the heaven and earth dichotomy of ancient rabbinic tradition is *sui generis*. Even within that tradition proper we have noted that there were nuances and obvious differences in the way it was conceived. All the more so is this true of the dichotomies of later philosophies and of the natural and social sciences. Each generation, each society, even each circle of scholars within a given society, even the same person in different contexts, conjure up their own picture of reality, speak in their own idiom, and are characterized by their own emphases. This, however, does not deter me from ending this article with a table of these dichotomies that suggests they are in some way parallel to the Shammai-Hillel debate on the primacy of heaven and earth. The synthesis of the sages who came after them that heaven and earth were unordered and equal, their primacy context-dependent is one that commends itself to many scholars today when they view the controversies involving the terms I have paired here:

Heaven	Earth
thought	deed/speech
word	deed
form	substance
mind	matter
rule	action
type	token
language	speech
competence	performance
general	particular
deduction	induction
mentalism	behaviourism
meaning	use
grammar	vocabulary
understanding	explanation/observation

No doubt there is a context of dogmatic scholarship within which this tabulation would be regarded as untenable. But within the context of the sense of the underlying unity of human experience down the ages, within the context of the search for relevance in our own traditions, the foregoing enterprise is valid, and it is in that spirit that it is offered.

## NOTES

1. Babylonian Talmud *Tamid* 32a. Alexander put the question to "the elders of the south" who have been identifying with the bearers of the Shammaite tradition. See E.E. Urbach, *The Sages and their Concepts and Beliefs*, Chapter IX, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1975), pp. 185-188 and notes *ad loc.*
2. Compare to Exodus 25:9, 40 where the design of the Tabernacle and its furnishings emanate *a priori* from the mind of God. For other parallels from early antiquity, see Cassuto, *Commentary to Exodus*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1967), pp. 322-323.
3. Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics*, (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1966).
4. B.F. Skinner, *Verbal Behaviour* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957) and Chomsky's critical review in *Language* 35.
5. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).
6. This is apparently the purport of the answer given by God to Moses in Exodus 34:19-23.
7. G.H. Mead, *Mind Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Behaviourist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950). For the approach of nonreductionist behaviorists, see E. Itkonen, *Linguistics and Metascience* (Finland: Studia Philosophica Turkuensia, Kokomaki, 1974).

8. Anscombe, Blackwell, eds., *Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1968).
9. Perhaps the same idea may legitimately be said to form the basis of that classic rabbinic solution to the discrepancy between the Exodus and Deuteronomy version of the Sabbath commandment in the Decalogue. In Exodus (20:8) we read: "Remember (*zakhor*) the Sabbath day"; in Deuteronomy (4:12): "Keep (*shamor*) the Sabbath day." On this phenomenon the rabbis commented (*Mekhilta* 7): "*Remember* and *keep* were spoken simultaneously." The rabbis were presumably proclaiming the idea that the constructs of memory and the acts of performance were but two facets of one reality. The memory-storing process—the activity of mind—of remembering the Sabbath was stimulated and sustained by the physical operations of keeping the Sabbath. The latter was, in its turn, motivated and perpetuated by the promptings of mind. There is a constant interaction between the twin aspects of the Sabbath command, between *shamor* and *zakhor*, between the concept or mental image—the memory—trace of an experience and the constant physical realization in positive and negative precepts.
10. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (MIT Press, 1969), p. 80.
11. Compare to Vygotsky *op. cit.* in his chapter on "Thought and Word," pp. 114-153, where he writes: "In the *beginning* was the deed. The word was not the beginning action was there first."
12. A similar dichotomy between "heaven" and "earth" can be detected in the dispute between the schools of Hillel and Shammai as to which *berakhah* should be recited first by the worshipper on the advent of a holy day—that on the wine or on proclaiming the holiness of the incoming day: "Bet Shammai maintain that the blessing on the day is to be recited first **מקדש על היום** and after that the blessing on the wine **ואחר כך מקדש על היין**; Bet Hillel that the blessing on the wine comes first and then the blessing on the day." (*Mishnah Berakhot*, 8, 1; *Pesahim*, 10, 2). Rambam in his commentary to the Mishnah explains: "Bet Shammai maintains that were it not for the holiness of the day, we would have no need for the wine; Bet Hillel that were it not for the existence of the wine we could not proclaim the holiness of the day." Thus the Hillelites, true to their principles, started from the earth—the human situation—the empirical existence of a human body interacting with its environment. The Shammaites, true to their principles, started from heaven—the primacy of the abstract concept of holiness that had first to be proclaimed. The latter spoke the language of system, reason, and logical necessity, the former that of process, function, and human experience.