

Soloveitchick Engagement with Western Philosophy 3

Last week we saw how the Rav used the existential turn in Western philosophy to propose a “retrospective analysis” of the halacha which bore resemblance to Husserl’s phenomenological reduction. Just as Husserl developed a method in order to reveal how the objective world comes to our consciousness, the Rav proposes a new philosophy of the halacha to show how the objective halacha comes to our religious consciousness. He states this explicitly when he writes

The reluctance on the part of the Jewish homo religious to accept Maimonidean rationalistic ideas is not ascribable to any agnostic tendencies, but to the incontrovertible fact that such explanations neither edify nor inspire the religious consciousness. (HM 92)

By establishing the cause, one objectifies the datum and subordinates it to a superior order. However, by exploring the norm retrospectively through vectorial hints which point toward subjectivity, the religious act with its unique structure retains its full autonomy. (HM 95).

Hence the method of repentance, which for Maimonides is implied in the sounding of the shofar, cannot serve as the cause of the commandment that would assure it a status of necessity, but it must be apprehended rather as an allusion to a correlated subjective aspect. (HM 96).

Footnote 108

The controversy between Maimonides and Nachmanides in reference to the interpretation of sacrifice is characteristic of the contrast between the causalistic and retrospective reconstruction methods...Nachmanides severely criticizes Maimonides for his rationalization, and introduced his own interpretation. Sacrifice, for him, refers to man himself. Worship is nothing but mental sacrifice. And animal sacrifice symbolizes the internal act of negation. (HM 131).

A careful reading of the Ramban Vayikra 1:9 explains how the act of sacrifice comes to our consciousness.

The religious element in Husserl’s phenomenology serves as the basis for the Rav’s application to the consciousness of the commandments.

In his book Heidegger Between Good and Evil Safranski writes 78-80

Husserl wrote at the beginning of his philosophical career, that he hoped “to find the way to God and to a truthful life through philosophical scholarship”. For what does it mean to find the source of consciousness? Husserl himself referred to this as the “transcendental ego”. But in fact, this is nothing other than assuming a God-like perspective.

This religious understanding of Husserl served as the philosophical basis of the Rav’s theology.

In his lectures on the Guide, published by Professor Lawrence Kaplan, the Rav says

The highest goal of man is identification with God, is achieving the consciousness that I exist together with God as part of one order of existence. My tzelem E-lohim, my image of God, is realized by my merging with the divine order of existence. Everything revolves about me. I am an infinitesimal existence within an infinite order of existence, I am aware of being included in the divine consciousness.” (MBPH 192).

II

The critique of Rahner's theology

In the opening to *Halakhic Man* the Rav writes

From time immemorial, whenever the identity of the individual and community was shattered, man encountered God (e.g. the Paradisiacal man after his fall: Moses after the episode of the golden calf). Religious experience is born in crisis. The transcendental "adventure" – "the flight of the alone to the Alone" is precipitated by despair. Man in his chancing upon the contradictory and absurd in life apprehends the vision of a hidden God – *deus absconditus*." (HM 3)

The homo religious calmly but persistently seeks his own path to full cognition of the world. He has faith in his ability to perform the miracle of comprehending the world and not withstanding the asymmetrical appearance of the *mysterium tremendum*. He eschews non-rational methods as a means to the realization of his goals (HM 4).

The Rav's usage of "transcendental", "*mysterium tremendum*," are clear references to the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner who studied in Berlin during the years the Rav was there and whose philosophy is also based upon similar concepts such as consciousness as describing the religious act.

Rahner in his work *Foundations of Christian Faith* writes

Every rationalism is based upon the conviction that a reality is present for man in spiritual and free self-possession only through the objectifying concept, and this becomes genuinely and fully real in scientific knowledge.

The transcendental experience (is) the subjective, unthematic, necessary and unfailing consciousness of the knowing subject that is co-present in every spiritual act of knowledge...this experience is called the transcendental experience...there is in this transcendental experience...knowledge of God....man is a being of transcendence towards the holy and absolutely real mystery

The spiritual knowledge of a personal subject is not of such a nature that the object presents itself from outside and is "possessed" as known in this way. It is rather a knowledge in which the knowing subject possesses in knowledge both itself and its knowledge...Rather the consciousness of the act of knowing something and the subject's consciousness of itself, that is, the subject's presence to itself, are situated so to speak at the other pole of the single relationship between the knowing subject and the known subject.

Both are part of what is called the anthropological turn in theology. See introduction to *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, and Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith*.

In the introduction to *The Emergence of Ethical Man* the Rav is quoted

As you know, my interest, at present, lies in the field of religious anthropology, the doctrine of man, within the philosophical perspective of Judaism.

In his book *Foundations of Christian Thought* Rahner writes that “theology itself implies a philosophical anthropology”.

The Rav writes (212)

Perhaps the Jew’s experience of God is less direct than the Gentile. What is more important – a disciplined life, ruled by ethical laws, or a foggy mystical experience, devoid of any impact of the religious norm? ... The German religious and philosophical tradition from Meister Eckhart to Heidegger was noted for its sentimentalism and metaphysical disposition, its understanding of infinity. Yet it never understood that religion is identical with the religious imperative. The same holds true for the religious subjectivism as exemplified by Sabatier and Kierkegaard.

The fundamental difference between Rahner and the Rav is that Rahner uses the phenomenological methodology to arrive at a consciousness of the God experience whereas the Rav uses this method to arrive at a consciousness of experience of the performance of the mitzvah.