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Representations of Rationality and Morality in the Judaic Tradition

Introduction

The overall purpose of the article is to show the philosophical background that stands behind monotheism. Therefore, we will focus mainly on how rationality and morality complement one another thus allowing for the formation of what we can loosely refer to as the monotheistic *Weltanschauung*.

The birth of Monotheism is what we loosely associate with the ancient Jews, nevertheless, in itself monotheism is not a Hebrew invention, since it was already practiced in ancient Egypt where it, however, took on an animistic form that was connected with the cult of the sun god. Therefore, the fundamental feature that separated the monotheistic God of the Jews from other deities of the ancient world is that the animistic gods where believed to reside within nature. In a sense they could be said to be nothing more than symbolical representations of the natural world. *Yahweh*, on the other hand, exceeded nature; He did not exist in it, but rather outside of it in the sense that nature was his creation. Subsequently, rationality and

morality were the two most important qualities that were ascribed to Him. Thus much as the ancient gods were considered to be capricious and amoral, the monotheistic God was believed to be the source of morality and rationality, two qualities that contributed to his alleged superiority.

However, superiority has its price which in this case is alienation. In other words, if God is to be regarded as a superior being, "He" (there is no way out of the masculinization in Judeo-Christianity) must be, at the same time, detached from reality; thus there is what can be called an ontological gap between being and beings, a gap that is fundamentally made up for by epistemology in the sense that God unconceals Himself basically in a linguistic way. What is meant here is that the linguistic order that is imposed on the character of the natural universe (God creates the world from the ether of the word) finds its reflection in a linguistic order that encroaches upon human moral life, which takes the form of the Decalogue.

Rationality and the status of reality

Another feature that is important about the character of the monotheistic God is that He is a being that created the world ex-nihilo, which is an attribute that makes Him different from Plato's Demiurge who basically does not so much create the world as simply put it in order, i.e. assemble it like a puzzle from the eternal *paradeigma* (Windelband, p. 130). The Biblical God, on the other hand, is the primordial cause of everything that exists and this includes the *paradeigma*, which appear under the countenance of the word.

Of course, such an understanding of divinity creates numerous problems; one of them regards the question whether reality is rational in itself or if it is imposed on the indifferent natural universe from the outside. The former view assumes that reality - like Hegel, for example maintains - is rational from the very beginning and that the natural world is composed out of ontological categories. Therefore, Levinas seems to be echoing Hegel when he claims that, "[r]ationality has to be understood as the incessant emergence of thought from the

energy of 'being's move' or its manifestation, and reason has to be understood out of this rationality" ("God and Philosophy," p 167).

In other words, all that we have to do is find the links between the different layers of being understood otherwise as the different cycles of nature. The other view, which appears in the philosophy of Kant, states that reality is meaningless in itself until it is activated by the mind. Thus just like divine intelligence activates the universe into being, the subjective mind activates the universe into meaning by imposing certain categories on the organics of the natural world. In other words, categories like time, space, quality, quantity do not exist in themselves but are brought into experience by the environment of the mind that renders things meaningful. Bearing that in mind Levinas states that:

> Kantian philosophy itself [*le criticism*], which has lent reason its form and figure, was still misled by a traditional logic accepted as fixed, and needed a phenomenology, whether Hegelian – overcoming the separations of logical understanding by a form of reason in movement, or, more humbly but more radically, Husserlian-seeking full lucidity on the hither side of logic in a living present, in its proto-impressions and their syntheses and "passive explications."
>
> (Outside the Subject, p. 31)

To move from Kant to Hegel is to substitute epistemology for ontology in the sense that meaning is a phenomenon that can be respectively seen to exist in the mind or in the world. In other words, Hegel's system is endorsed by religion, whilst Kant's by science.

Kant's privileging of subjectivity has similar consequences to the ones that we find with regard to the ultimate being. In other words, God's superiority simultaneously leads to his alienation from beings. As it is, we can approach the notion of the human self in quite a similar way, i.e. if the self, the seat of the epistemological categories is to be the most superior being on earth then, it must, at the same time, be detached and alienated from other (inferior) beings. Therefore, there is an ontological gap separating God from the self just as there is a gap separating the self from the animalistic and vegetative universe. The Biblical phrase that human beings should "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle,

and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis, 1:26) points not only to human superiority but also to their alienation. Moreover, it is a statement that speaks volumes for the metaphysical understanding of the self and the world. From this perspective reality does not have much value in itself; its only merit stems from its appropriation of the norms, needs and desires of the human self.

A completely different approach to being and the natural world can be found in animisms like Taoism which clearly states that the goal of existence dwells not in overcoming nature but in submitting oneself to it (Smith, p. 232). In other words, the self should seek to incorporate itself into the structure of the Brahmanic universe. The onto-theological perspective, on the other hand, states that the natural universe should be incorporated into the existential and cognitive structures of the self.

Thus just as God unconceals Himself to human beings through the medium of morality and rationality, human beings unconceal themselves to the world in the same way, i.e. as rational and moral agents. This is why human beings appear to be beings that are supposedly superior to other earthly existents, since they are detached from them by the fact that they are rational and moral, where the latter is a quality that gives the former a certain sense of direction. In other words, morality anticipates rationality which brings us very close to the views of Levinas whose philosophy is built on the foundation that ethics serves as the foundation of metaphysics. As it is, both morality and rationality help the human self to overcome the gap separating it from other existents, yet it is morality that functions as the self's primordial condition.

Therefore, the idea of the Good which is the basis of monotheistic ethics is what Levinas places over the concept of truth which the theological tradition sees as a variety or a synonym of the Good. Therefore, from the theological point of view the Good is reduced to a rationalistic understanding of truth. In the Levinasian sense, on the other hand, the idea of the Good is otherwise than being which means that it is not reducible to the category of truth. In itself it is expressed

in the face of the other. In other words, the Good is what the self produces not in itself and for itself but in its responsibility for the other, i.e. it is a certain understanding of truth that prevails in a given historical epoch, therefore, it is what makes historical renditions of goodness and truth possible. We see, therefore, that from this perspective the understanding of truth derives and is dependent on the notion of the Good whose understanding brings Levinas close to Platonism where the Good is conceived as the highest idea and the source of all illumination that Levinas compares to the idea of the Thou developed by Buber, for he claims that, "the light of the Thou – just as the intelligible sun in Plato, the idea of the Good, and the phosphorescence of the *Sein des Seinden* later on in Heidegger [are] the primal truth which is the source of all other truths" ("Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge," p. 72).

However, Levinas is also indebted to Aristotle's conception of God as an *ens perfectissimum* that in itself does not do anything more than inspire things with the will to attain a state of perfectness which is reflected in the human need of the Good, i.e. of the constant need of development. Like many others Levinas also wonders about how the perfectness of God can preserve its perfectness on the background of an imperfect world:

> The theory of knowledge is a theory of truth. Like the Parmenides of Plato it poses the question: how can the absolute being manifest itself in truth? For to be known, it must manifest itself in the world where error is possible. How can a being, subject to error, touch the absolute being without impairing its absolute character? It is reasonable to suggest that the efforts of ancient Greek philosophy were largely devoted to this question of how to mediate between appearance and reality. For in a universe conceived as a single whole, the gap between the two had to be bridged; and it was assumed that the mind need only reflect on itself to discover the One from which it derived.
>
> (Ibid., p. 60)

Subsequently, Levinas maintains that nothing can justify the existence of evil. Therefore, he rejects all attempts of the rationalization of evil and suffering that try to find an ethical justification to suffering like we find, for example, in the Biblical case of Job. However, much as

suffering is meaningless from an individual self's temporal perspective, it acquires meaning once we bring the other onto the scene, since then the self feels responsible not only for itself but for the suffering of the other.

What this means is that we have to bracket the conventional understanding of time as an objective and progressing continuum. It seems that our conventional temporality that is governed by the past-present-future referentiality does not accord with divine temporality. The standard understanding of time comes into being only from the moment of the creation of the world. *Eo ipso*, the world was not created earlier than it was, since there was no before as time came into being together with the world.

The Augustinian conception of time that we are developing here is similar to the one that many centuries later we find in Bergson, i.e. both thinkers believe - in their own ways - that the conventional division of time into past-present-future is only that, i.e. a convention of the mind. What this means is that in God there exists something like an eternal present. Charles Taylor explains the Augustinian understanding of time in the following way, "[t]he past, which 'objectively' exists no more, is here in my present; it shapes this moment in which I turn to a future, which objectively is not yet, but which is here qua project"(p. 56). In other words, St. Augustine thinks that only the present is really real by saying that when we actually talk about reminiscences we still experience them in the present. *Idem per idem*, the precise definition of the past should be that of past experiences "called out" in the present. The same thing applies to the future. What this means is that the past is based on memory, whereas the future on the idea of anticipation and expectation. However, just as with the past, the future is a phenomenon that takes place in the present, so once again when we talk about the future the precise formula should be future as experienced in the present. In addition to that from the Augustinian perspective time is phenomenon that we experience subjectively.

Suffering, fear and the unconcealment of moral thinking

Returning to the idea of suffering that was mentioned a while ago we come to see that for Levinas the suffering of the other causes the self to feel the need to respond. Levinas holds that, "[t]he vortex – suffering of the other, my pity for his suffering his pain over my pity, my pain over his pain, etc. – stops at me. The I is what involves one movement more in this iteration. My suffering is the cynosure of all the sufferings – and of all the faults, even of the fault of my persecutors, which amounts to suffering the ultimate persecution, suffering absolutely" ("Substitution," p. 122). In other words, suffering is a condition that enhances the development of selfhood and the only way in which it can be made meaningful is when the self tries to take responsibility for the suffering of the other, since otherwise suffering contributes to the self's anonymity. What this means is that the suffering of the other, which obliges the self to take action, represents an ethical moment, perhaps even the first ethical moment.

The self responds to the other basically in a positive way through responsibility or in a negative way through resentment. As it is, both qualities refer to the self's dependency on the existence of the other, of the need to respond to the other. This is why following Levinas we can speak of the self as being taken hostage by the other, i.e. Levinas declares that the "subject is a hostage" (Ibid., p. 101). Nevertheless, the obsession with the other and the self's responsibility or resentment of it raise the self into awareness and cognitive being which, at the same time, makes it clear that the self is a moral entity before it can be understood as a rational one.

Generally speaking the Judeo-Christian moral system derives from the Decalogue that Moses brings down with himself from Mount Sinai. One of the problems that one is faced with when looking at the Commandments is the negativism that they express. Nine out of the Ten Commandments are negative in the sense that they are nothing more than prohibitions. It seems almost that if one refrains from doing evil, one is sure to do good. There is, however, a rational explanation to the overall negativism that we find in the structure of the

Decalogue. The prohibitive morality is the remnant of the old taboo morality which in itself stems from the existential fear of being.

The notion of fear brings us to the idea of individuality. What must be remembered is that the most important reason why we want to put a meaningful construction on our existence is that we are fundamentally mortal beings. If we refer to the words of the Buddha, what we learn is that the primordial constitution of being is temporality:

> Then the Buddha addressed all the monks once more, and these were the very last words he spoke:
>
> "Behold, O monks, this is my last advice to you. All component things in the world are changeable. They are not lasting. Work hard to gain your own salvation."
>
> Then the Buddha lapsed into the jhana stages, or meditative absorptions. Going from level to level, one after the other, ever deeper and deeper. Then he came out of the meditative absorption for the last time and passed into nirvana, leaving nothing whatever behind that can cause rebirth again in this or any other world. (Buddhist Studies: http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/2_31lbud.htm [last access 09.05.12])

In other words, we should learn to look at being not in a quidditative sense but in a verbal one. Thus the Buddhist understanding of being is "Panta Rheist." If so, then, we must also look at ourselves as beings that are fundamentally temporal and, therefore, finite. However, human beings more than being simply mortal are also beings that live with the awareness of finitude. This means that the awareness of finitude obliges us to put on a meaningful construction on being. We may even say that if it was not for the fact that we are mortal, life would not have to mean anything at all. The quest for meaning which is as inevitable as breathing makes sense only on the background of finitude. In other words, rationality and morality are not the primordial attributes of human being; rather, we are socialized into the rational and moral paradigms and these two conditions allow us to deal with temporality. The view presented above accords with the Heideggerian idea of being-towards-death that Levinas, however, rejects, since for him death is a mystery, which is why it cannot constitute the self's

ultimate horizon in whose foreground the being of selfhood makes sense:

> Being toward death, in Heidegger's authentic existence, is a supreme lucidity and hence a supreme virility. It is Dasein's assumption of the uttermost possibility of existence, which precisely makes possible all other possibilities, and consequently makes possible the very feat of grasping a possibility – that is, it makes possible activity in freedom. Death in Heidegger is an event of freedom, whereas for me the subject seems to reach the limit of the possible in suffering. It finds itself enchained, overwhelmed, and in some way passive.
>
> ("Time and the Other," pp. 40-41)

Thus for Levinas it is suffering and not death that is constructive in the formation of selfhood. Generally speaking never are we as self-conscious of ourselves as in moments of intense fear and pain. This is why consciousness can be considered to be based on the memorization of trauma, i.e. the traumatic moments that shaped civilization have been committed to the collective memory of humanity and this is what we loosely call consciousness.

Availing ourselves of the Biblical tradition we come to find that suffering is the major theme of *The Book of Job*. For our part we would like to focus on a certain aspect of the text when Job pushed to the brink of despair asks what we can loosely refer to as the "why question" that is repeated five times:

> 3:11Why did I not die at birth,
>
> Come forth from the womb and
>
> Expire?
>
> 3:12Why were there knees to
>
> receive me,
>
> or breast for me to suck?
>
> 3:16 Or why was I not buried like a
>
> stillborn child,
>
> like an infant that never sees
>
> the light?

> 3:20 "Why is light given to one in
> misery,
> and life to the bitter in soul…
> 3:23 Why is light given to one who
> cannot see the way,
> whom God had forced in?
> ("The Book of Job," 3.11-3.23)

Job's question is at base an existentialist one that might as well be expressed by writers like Camus. Nevertheless, we would like to compare Job's question to the notion of *thaumazein* (wonder). For the Greeks knowledge stemmed from wonder and was associated with the so called objective point of view that one could reach after "disinteresting" oneself from embodied being (emotions, intuitions, practical existential abilities, traditional folk knowledge, etc.). Nevertheless, knowledge so understood demands certain kinds of actions that would allow us to detach ourselves from the embodied being and this is where ethics comes into play. The point of ethics is, therefore, to desubjectify experience and to discover universal and objective modes of conduct that are the product of reason and not the heart. Individuality, from this perspective is understood as a failure in the sense that it distorts human behavior, since instead of living in accordance with universal principles, we find ourselves simply satisfying our private desires. Needless to say, the question of the real and unreal comes into play at this point. Of course, reality for the Greeks is associated with the universal laws of being that serve as the foundation of all metaphysics. Physics, on the other hand, is bodily, subjective and, therefore, unreal, since it is limited to an individualized perspective not to a universal one that would appeal to everyone regardless of time, place or character. This is why mathematics played such an important role in the intellectual life of the Greeks, since its truths were supposedly not true for today but for yesterday as well as tomorrow. Thus much as the Greeks are credited with the discovery of philosophy, they should also be credited with the

discovery of science which is after all based on the disclosure of the universal laws of nature.

Nevertheless, in addition to the Greeks, Judaism also had a tremendous impact on the shaping of the Western self. After all Numenius is believed to have said that: "Plato was Moses talking Greek" (as quoted in Hamlyn, p. 75). Therefore, the intellectuality of the Western world was modeled on the disinterested perspective of the Greeks; however, the Hebrew tradition which in itself contradicts the Hellenic intellectual paradigm also exercised a major influence on the Western world. Nevertheless, much as the Greeks looked for that which was universal, the Hebrews focused on their own uniqueness and on human particularity.

However, what the two perspectives share is the idea of detachment. Much as the Greeks detached themselves from the world of nature, the ancient Jews detached themselves from the world of prevailing cultures which is what led some commentators to say that this was the only reason why an insignificant group of nomads managed to survive in spite of all odds (Smith, p. 225).

The Jews detached themselves from other cultures and they believed that God had revealed himself to them in particular. The a-historical world of reason that was open to all was in this way replaced by a historical world revealed especially to a given group of people. One of the leading thinkers of the seventeenth century Blaise Pascal believed that the Judeo-Christian God was embodied in the world of life; in other words, this was not the god of Plato or Aristotle that existed in some metaphysical universe that was disconnected from human history. As it is, the Judeo-Christian God is a *Deus absconditus*, a being that both reveals as well as conceals itself in the human historical world (Kołakowski, p. 149).

Ours, therefore, is a very conflicted culture; one in which historical experience of the Jews (The Covenant, The Ten Commandments, for the Christians the Incarnation) is confronted by the a-historical world of concepts that served as the foundation of all rational conduct that was the basis of Greek thinking:

> Other cultures have multiple traditions - China has Taoism and Confucianism, for example, but these traditions normally complement each other. No culture but ours has two traditions so totally opposed. The Greek discovery of detached, disembodied, timeless, universal, reflective rationality contradicts the Hebrew revelation of involved, embodied, historical, local commitment. One side gives us our ability to think: the other, our deepest experiences.
>
> (Dreyfus, p. 139)

The following question emerges at this point: are humans moral on account of the actions that they commit themselves to or are they moral because they follow given rules that are not the product of reason and rational conduct but of divine revelation (The Decalogue)? At the same time, from the Hebrew tradition it appears that God communicates not with abstract entities but with individuals and there are no universal modes of conduct that would appeal to everyone in an equally effective way. Nevertheless, some regulations of social conduct are necessary and this is where the role of the Decalogue comes in. Huston Smith states that ethical rules are necessary mainly for social purposes, as they regulate the individual's right to power, money, sex and language (Smith, p. 239).

Conclusion

Levinas sometimes attacked Christianity for not being as ethical as Judaism. The effect of this is the Nietzschean proclamation of the death of God, since it implies the eclipse of ethical values that made the belief in God possible. The answer to this crisis is Judaism with its ethicality. The Jewish understanding of a detached God is quite similar to the notion of the Good that we find in Plato. The Good was detached from the world of sense and occasionally reproduced itself in various incarnations, nevertheless, it was always detached from the world of experience. In a sense both God and the idea of the Good can be said to exist beyond physical being.

As we can see from the perspective we have outlined above, the human relation with God is primarily ethical in the sense that God speaks to the human self through the face of the other and not from some otherworldly transcendence. Moreover, our communication with

God is engendered by our communication and responsibility for the other. Paradoxically, this, of course, undermines the value of prayer which seems to be an exceptional private experience and, therefore, in Levinasian terms unethical. In other words, prayer is based on the belief in a God that is transcendent and not here in the face of the other. Nevertheless, in the Levinasian sense, "[t]rue prayer, then, is never for oneself, never for one's own needs" (*Totality and Inifinity*, p. 115). Bearing that in mind we come to see that theology is off to a bad start, since it is more concerned with finding a rational explanation to the being of God than an ethical one. From his perspective God speaks to the self from the others' want of responsibility. Moreover, the name of God is ineffable, since its effability would automatically suggest that God's nature can be reduced to the level of rationality and the point being made here is that God exceeds rationality.

All in all, the philosophical conception of God - the God of theology - is basically (from Levinas' perspective) an atheistic God, since the road to God is based on the dictum of *fides quarens intellectum*, which means that faith predetermines understanding. Thus, faith is the link with the face of the other which in turn is linked with the face of God. Nevertheless, generally speaking we can distinguish between two forms of atheism. The first concerns the self as a detached being, a being that does not seek union with God, a being that is capable of such separateness. The other form of atheism concerns the self's conscious denial of the existence of God. *Eo ipso*, the very idea of having a unique soul is, however paradoxically it may sound, an atheistic assumption. The basic danger that emanates from atheism is that it denies the value of morality, in other words, it is a return to the pagan world of myth and nature. Nevertheless, Levinas, whilst promoting the overall feeling of religiousness, seems to have taken for granted that religious thinking can be dangerous and intolerant in its fundamentalist sense.

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