

The Ethical Concepts of Judaism and of Ancient Greece

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The purpose of this essay is to compare and contrast some salient, though not always clearly recognized and acknowledged, aspects of the ethical perception characterizing the Judaic and the ancient Greek civilizations. To allow a succinct treatment, a topic of this range imposes selectivity which, in turn, involves a subjective judgement in making the choices of representative expressions of these vast cultures. While this limitation is readily admitted, our selections are not made from marginal or esoteric texts, but rely on central and mainstream sources that are well known or easily accessible.

The moral perceptions of the Greeks are largely, though not exclusively, culled from their philosophical work, while the ethical notions of Judaism are primarily reconstructed from the analysis of the practical moral precepts. There is a difference of approach and stress in these two civilizations – one with a penchant for philosophy and the other oriented toward practice. Yet the Greek philosophers did not divorce theory from practice – at least, they did not intend to do so – and Judaism's applied ethics is based on broader principles, a "philosophy" in a broad sense, which is fairly transparent through its substantive and practical results. Therefore, a comparison of the two approaches is feasible.

Our essay will limit its scope to biblical and rabbinical Judaism on the one hand, and to Greek philosophical texts and some examples of drama on the other hand.

The Right Way

"Which is the right way for a man to choose?" The question is attributed to Rabbi, that is to say Rabbi Yedudah the Prince, who lived in third century A.D., and it appears in the tractate *Aboth* of the Mishna.¹

That the question was asked by a Jewish scholar, residing in Judea, then under Roman rule, is of some interest, for it indicates the moral concern of Judaism even under the conditions of a foreign, often oppressive, rule. The question seems to indicate that, whatever the outward circumstances, Judaism remains concerned with the right way of life, the proper moral behavior.

Characteristically for the ethical commitment of Judaism, the question is not "which is the way for a man to choose?" – a question that would imply a spectrum of answers and options, such as convenience, profit, expediency, and morality. The question is "which is the *right* way," and thus commits the search to the ethical domain. The *right* behavior is singled out from, and elevated above, other possible norms. The clear implication of the question is that the *right* conduct is of paramount importance and must be the sovereign principle in human life – a conviction characteristic of the substance and tenor of Judaism in general.

Yet, if the ethical dominance of human life is unquestionable, this dominance is not *imposed* on man. For the very question "which is the right way for a man to *choose*?" indicates an explicit and emphatic assumption of free choice. There is, there must be, a way that is right – absolutely right; but it is up to man, the agent or actor in life, to find this way, to recognize it, and to adopt it in practice. Indeed, already the story of the Garden of Eden, in concluding that man, after eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree, is become like God, "to know good and evil,"² implies the elevation of humanity to moral knowledge, and therefore to moral choice and responsibility. The notion of free choice between good and evil permeates the ethical passages in the Pentateuch, and it animates the books of the prophets. The stance is expressed in stark simplicity in the following passage: "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil."³ While there is a clear and insistent urging to follow good and abstain from evil, the decision is the doer's, not God's or the prophet's.

Thus, the query of Rabbi is not an innovation. It is a reflection of a central preoccupation in Judaism that has undergone various phases over the long history of Jewish civilization. Indeed, the posing of the question by Rabbi suggests an active involvement in defining what is right in his time and place, indicating a heightened ethical awareness. Yet, the implication of development of the ethical norms and perception suggested here does not detract from the assertion of the fundamental Judaic conviction about the stabil-

ity and permanence of the notions of good and evil. The interpretation of the biblical commandments and restrictions, and the refinement that often results from the comments and commentaries, was not meant to repudiate or undermine basic moral concerns and convictions. It did not come to replace the basic truths of right and wrong, but to enlarge and embellish them, or to adapt them to new issues and novel conditions.

It is this belief in the absoluteness of the basic ethical norms and their fundamental importance and relevance to the human condition, as well as the substantive nature of the ethical imperatives, that has been the foremost contribution of Judaism to what is, somewhat vaguely, referred to as "Western civilization."

The Proper Virtue

The conscious concern with ethical problems also can be clearly discerned in ancient Greek civilization. Indeed, due to the development of philosophical thinking, problems of ethics became in Greece a subject of intellectual inquiry and systematic research and speculation. In this respect ancient Greece differs from biblical Israel, and even from subsequent rabbinical Judaism, which did not explore the *philosophy* of right, but concentrated almost exclusively on the *substance* of good and evil and the *application* of morality to concrete situations and everyday life.

Let us introduce the Greek involvement in the matter by a reference to a passage in a dialogue of Plato – apparently characteristic of his teacher Socrates, and conceivably disclosing an actual situation. Socrates tells us how, having come across Callias, the son of Hipponicus, and the father of two sons, he addressed him in the following manner:

Callias," I said, "if your two sons were foals or calves, there would be no difficulty in finding some one to put over them; we should hire a trainer of horses, or a farmer probably, who would improve and perfect them in their own proper virtue and excellence; but as they are human beings, whom are you thinking of placing over them?"⁴

Characteristically, as we shall try to show, the question posed is not as to the right conduct, but focuses on the right personality. The issue is not the right way, but the proper virtue. The problem is not the correct action, but the character of the actor.

The reasoning of the Greek approach is implied in the above passage and is conveyed in the focal phrase "who would improve

and perfect them in their own proper virtue and excellence," or, to follow the Greek text literally, "who would intend to make them beautiful and good according to the appropriate virtue." The educational ideal is to make the educatee beautiful and good (*kalos kagathos*), but this perfection or virtue (*arete*) is peculiar to each being. Indeed, the perfection or virtue peculiar to the horse is bound with its distinctive nature, and so the best horse is the most "horsish" of horses. Similarly, the ideal man is the most human of human beings. In other words, to be good one must be true to one's own self, or one's nature. This may not be as easy as it sounds, for there are obstructions in the way of one's natural development. Therefore, it is the task of the trainer of horses, or the educator, to elicit the true excellence, each from his own trainee.

This approach assumes that, in the ultimate sense, virtue is derived from nature, the desirable from the actual, the right from the existent. Such a connection does not provide a full and substantive answer as to the character and proper behavior of the virtuous man, for there can be disputes as to the nature, or true nature, of man. Yet the link is significant in that it relates the *norm* of human conduct to the *reality* of human nature.

This link is stressed also by Aristotle. He argues that as an artist's goodness lies in the performance of his function, so man's goodness consists of the performance of the human function. If the function is performed well, excellence or virtue is attained.⁵ The function of man is the expression of his nature, and therefore it is human nature that ultimately determines virtue. "Now what is good by nature is also good for the good man."⁶

Moreover, a man who acts in accordance with his nature is not only virtuous, but also happy or blessed (*makarios, eudaimon*), a virtually self-evident conclusion, which is largely assumed by Plato and Aristotle. Thus, we arrive at a relationship that can be reduced, in a somewhat simplified way, to the equation: (Exercise of) Nature = Happiness = Virtue.

This makes moral issues singularly self-sufficient. For, it would seem that all one has to do to attain both perfection and well-being (or happiness) is to act in accordance with one's nature. The agent can attain the moral objective and its accompanying reward by self-development and self-fulfilment. He is essentially autarchic as an ethical being. It is the proper virtue of the individual, that is to say, the virtue peculiar to him as a human being, that has to be attained, and, in principle, it can be attained by him in isolation. He

does not need the fabric of society or the desirable resolution of the intricacies of human relations to attain perfection. Perfection is potentially in the acting individual, and not in the right social action. The ethical ideal is attained by what one is in oneself, provided one fulfils one's natural potential, rather than by what one contributes to society.⁷

The Aristotelian equation also has significant implications for the nature of vice and evil. If living in accordance with nature is virtuous, failing to do so does not mean embracing an evil that is the polar counterpart of good. It only means missing the good. One does not choose between virtue and vice, as the Bible sees it; one chooses virtue, or one misses it – in a greater or lesser degree. Not attaining virtue is like not attaining or maintaining perfect health, or becoming sick.⁸

It is this perception of virtue that falls in line with the Greek penchant for and prominence in the art of sculpting the human figure. Greek sculpture is dominated by the depiction of the perfect, healthy, and beautiful body. It is this natural physical evidence that is the ideal. The natural, the desirable, and the beautiful coincide. It is the parallel perfection of the natural mental capacities that is expected by the ethical philosophy. In a way, the two aspects of man, the physical and the mental, complement each other, as the phrase *kalos k'agathos* (beautiful and good) implies. For even if the phrase came to indicate moral beauty and goodness, the word "beautiful" is obviously borrowed from the sphere of physical appearance. The origin of the metaphor is revealing.

Plato's educational program for his guardians in the *Republic* reflects this basic perception. Education has to take care of the educatee's body and soul. The two are complementary elements of human personality and essentially parallel. No trace here of the later Christian notion of a basic conflict between matter and spirit, body and soul, the failing flesh and the willing spirit. Both body and soul, in the Greek perception, are worthy objectives of cultivation and development. Consequently, Plato recommends that the body be maintained and developed by *gumnastike*, which is a combination of exercise, right nourishment, and health habits, and that the soul be taken care of by *mousike*, artistic and mental training that develops and improves it. Characteristically, he points out that the two aspects of educational effort must cooperate, looking at the whole person, so that the proper relationship is attained between body and soul: neither a brutish athlete nor a weak-spirited artist is

desirable. The body and spirit must complement each other in the right manner in order to attain a person endowed with virtue and excellence.⁹

The Virtuous Agent and the Beneficiary of Action

The centrality of virtue and excellence in Greek ethical philosophy implicitly sees the moral agent as the focus of ethical concern. The ethicist, the educator, or the educatee himself, must be concerned foremost with how to perfect the human individual, how to improve his soul. Just as the improvement of the body focuses on the person to be improved, so does the perfection of the soul. The person focused on is perceived as the agent of moral activity rather than as the recipient of another person's action. Not that the possible impact of his action on others is denied, but such an impact is a secondary issue at best.

The moral perception of the Bible and of subsequent Judaism is quite different. Here the agent is not in the center of ethical concern and evaluation. The focus and moral attention is the behavior of the person inasmuch as it affects other people. It is not the perfection, the virtue, the excellence of the acting man that is examined, but his action as it affects other human beings. It is the concern for the lot of the recipient of the action that is in the forefront of moral commitment. When the Ten Commandments solemnly proclaim: "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not commit adultery," "Thou shalt not steal," "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor," and "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house,"¹⁰ – it is not the virtue of the doer that is the concern of the commandments, but the well-being of the neighbor.

The Bible sees the community as consisting of human agents and the recipients of their actions, and its moral ideal is to control and affect human action in such a way that it will not harm other persons, and will enhance the well-being of all. For, as we shall further see, it is not only the prohibition of harmful acts that animates the moral commandments, it is also the promotion of beneficial action. Whether the agents, the doers, become, because of their moral behavior, ennobled, whether their souls are improved, whether they come closer to being more beautiful, does not seem to interest the Israelite moralist.

Not so in ancient Greece. There, as we have seen, it is the perfection of the agent, the doer, that is the starting point and remains

the focal issue. Whatever impact his behavior may have on others seems a secondary consideration and is derived from the agent's excellence. When Socrates addresses his fellow citizens, he does not exhort them to do right in respect of *others*, but to take care of their own souls:

You, my friend, – a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens, – are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all?¹¹

To be sure, one can point out that on the Hebrew side there are also references to the righteous, i.e., to persons of virtue. Already in the Bible the Psalmist, to quote one example, trusts that “the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous.”¹² Still, “the righteous” is one who acts rightly towards his fellow beings, and only thereby does he become righteous. The action toward others precedes, and determines, the virtue of the agent. In rabbinical literature the virtue of the agent may get a more prominent place. Thus, the question “What is the good way for a man to cleave to?” seems to imply a concern for virtue. Yet, when the answer given to it by Rabbi Eleazar is “good heart,”¹³ we are facing again a virtue derived from deeds toward others. Goodheartedness, unlike physical vigor or a harmonious soul, is not a virtue that can be contained within its bearer. It depends on his attitude toward others, toward the doer's fellow beings, his brethren. Without other human beings, one cannot be good hearted, though one can be endowed with beautiful body and soul, in the Greek sense, even on a desert island.

It is noteworthy to mention, in this connection, the inquiry pursued by Plato in *Gorgias* regarding whether the doing or the suffering of injustice is the greater evil. The conclusion reached, after a tortuous argument between Socrates and Polus, is that doing injustice is the greater evil, for it corrupts the soul, which is more important than the body affected by the suffering. Moreover, if the doer of injustice submits to judicial punishment, he counters and diminishes the evil. For it is such punishment that cures the soul of evil, just as a surgical treatment may be required for healing the body.¹⁴

The argument is characteristic of the Platonic perception of morals. It is the agent and the perfection of his soul that remain the

focus of moral concern. To be sure, a just man will act justly toward *others*, but in the argument it is the virtue of the acting person that is the center of attention and the focus of contention.

While we have no parallel dialogue in the Bible or rabbinical literature, it is easily arguable that the debate would have been conducted along different lines. The evil of acting unjustly would have been attributed to the consequences for the sufferer from the action. The doer would have been considered evil, because his brethren suffered. To right the situation, if this was possible, the victim would have to be compensated, rather than the doer "cured." Thus, characteristically for biblical law, a thief has to compensate the victim by repaying double the value of the thing stolen, and there is no concern for the moral improvement of the thief.¹⁵

To be sure, Plato in the *Republic* reaches beyond the individual and his excellence. He designs the perfect society, the ideal state. Obviously, a state consists of individuals who cooperate and its perfection depends on their interaction and relations.

Yet, there is a profound difference between the perfect state of Plato and the righteous community as envisaged in the Bible. The perfection of the Platonic republic is *sui generis* and not the sum total of the righteous and compassionate conduct of its citizens, as is implied in the Bible. Each citizen of Plato's republic has to exercise his proper and distinctive function in society, and then the whole will be harmonious and perfect. Whether the citizens will be equitably treated, or happy with their allotted function, or with the state at large is, at best, a question of secondary importance. The aim is the perfection of the whole, irrespective of the lot of the individual citizens, just as the beauty of the entire statue and not of its constituent parts is the objective of the artist, as Plato explains in his famous parable.¹⁶ The human individuals in the perfect state, far from being the primary beneficiaries of Plato's grand design – as they would be in the just Hebrew society – are foremost the means for the excellence of the collective entity. Consequently, there need be no equitable distribution of benefits among them, nor special concern for the underprivileged, nor any questions of fairness or compassion.

This is in stark contrast with the teaching of the Bible and of rabbinical Judaism. There the clear concern of ethical legislation is the well-being of each individual, and the laws, commandments, and exhortations aim at securing such well-being. There is an overall assumption of some basic needs for safety, subsistence, and fair

treatment, needs that all individuals share. There is not, and there cannot be, a perfect society that is divorced from the welfare of the individuals of which it consists, or that uses them for its own separate and distinct perfection and beauty. In short, in the case of Plato, the right social relations or social structure is but a means to the excellence of the state as such, whereas in Judaism social ethics is a means to the well-being of individual beneficiaries. A holy nation is a just nation, and a just nation is one in which everyone gets his share of well-being.

The Substance of Good

What is the essence of virtue? What is the substance of goodness? While the answer to this question is complex and not always identical in the Greek philosophical texts, there seems to be an agreement on one point: the foremost and central element in human virtue is wisdom or knowledge.

Thus, to quote one example from Plato, wisdom is depicted as being, at least, the essential component of the human soul, which is capable of leading other propensities in the desirable direction. While such qualities as temperance, courage, and quickness of apprehension can in themselves be either good or not, can lead to either happiness or hurt, it is the guidance of wisdom that will assure the ultimate value. In the wording of Plato, "the things of the soul herself hang upon wisdom, if they are to be good." Consequently, "virtue is either wholly or partly wisdom."¹⁷

In other passages Plato sees man led astray by the wild impulses, by the "wild beast" in him, and turned into a moral monster. Here again it is reason that is the faculty entrusted with controlling and preventing such a development.¹⁸

In a parallel way, society – or the state, the *polis* – can be led astray by various appetites from the path of its own virtue and excellence. The *good* society is one in which the diverse elements, the various functional classes, coexist in harmony, and this can be achieved by entrusting the rule of such a society to philosophers, that is to say, the embodiment of wisdom. In the famous words of Plato, "Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, cities will never have rest from their evils."¹⁹

Wisdom is extolled not only as a means of maintaining the har-

mony and virtue of the individual soul or of assuring the harmony and excellence of the body politic. Wisdom is also advocated for its own sake, and the pursuit of wisdom regarded as the highest value man can aspire to. While this point of view is expressed by Plato in his lavish praise of philosophy and philosophers throughout his writings, the point can be focused on more conveniently by referring to a succinct passage in Aristotle's *Ethics*.

Aristotle, though aware of the fact that man's composite nature requires diverse elements to make life virtuous and happy – including material amenities to maintain life and health, a social setting that requires proper conduct, and moral principles to guide passions and feeling²⁰ – stresses above all the contemplative activity, the distinctive characteristic of the philosopher. It is contemplative activity (*theoria*), thinking for its own sake, that corresponds to men's highest faculty, that is the highest virtue (*arete*) and results in the perfect happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*).²¹

While admittedly some of the virtues discussed by Aristotle and his predecessor Plato, are meaningful and valuable only in a social context, pure reflection and contemplation also can be achieved by a solitary man, provided he is wise: "The wise man can practice contemplation by himself, and the wiser he is the more he can do it." Thus, the wise man, or the philosopher, "is the most self-sufficient of men."²² This self-sufficiency of contemplation, or of the contemplating man, seems to be one more reason for regarding it as the highest virtue, and the philosophers as the most excellent manifestation of humanity. The self-sufficiency of contemplation makes it, essentially, a nonsocial virtue.

The position of Judaism on the substance of ethical values is quite different, and, as we shall see, it complements the moral concern with the recipient of action. It is not wisdom that is the focal virtue in the Bible or in rabbinical Judaism, but justice and compassion. These principles – or "virtues," if one speaks of the just and compassionate person – inform the legal commandments and the moral exhortations of the Pentateuch and the prophets. There is the commandment not to reap the corners of the field or gather the gleanings at the harvest, but leave them to the poor²³ – just one characteristic fragment of the fair and compassionate legislation of the Pentateuch. There is the injunction to the judges not to "respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty"; but to judge the fellow being in righteousness.²⁴ "Learn to do well; seek judgement, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow," exhorts the prophet.²⁵

Such action does not require speculative ability or contemplation, but simple determination to follow the commandments of the Lord, which are tantamount to the moral principles of justice and compassion. There is no conscious attempt in the Bible – unlike in rabbinical literature – to make a distinction between justice and compassion, or to classify the laws and commandments as belonging under the biblical exhortation, “Thou shalt love by neighbor as thyself.”²⁶ For the love of one’s fellow being, and treating him as if he were oneself, implies dealing with him justly and compassionately.

However, the biblical moral demands reach beyond justice and compassion. Thus the Lord exhorts: “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt [openly] chide thy fellow being, and not carry [hidden] grudge against him.”²⁷ The expectation here is of morality that transcends behavior and action toward one another, and aims at brotherly relations infusing and ruling one’s heart and feelings. The aim is a true brotherly community and not only just, or even compassionate, behavior.

All these demands, and the virtues derived from them, are clearly and emphatically of a social nature. Justice and compassion by their very nature focus on the beneficiary of the just and compassionate behavior. Brotherly love benefits the object of such sentiment. The stress here is not on the virtue, *arete*, of the doer, and his *eudaimonia*, or happiness, but on the survival and at least elementary conditions of material well-being and social acceptance of the recipients of just and compassionate behavior. Beyond these looms the vision of a peaceful society, informed by genuine brotherly relations that will benefit everybody. The broad concern with the well-being of the community, with the benefits of the individuals incurred from a moral order (rather than with the virtue of the doers and the excellence of the community as such and its aesthetic perfection) is clearly transparent in the eschatological vision of the prophet:

And he shall judge among many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid.²⁸

It is noteworthy that this vision encompasses a universal peace, or an overall freedom from the scourge of war and violence and

fear. An ethical approach that is concerned with the well-being of the recipients of action, in the last resort, has to embrace all humanity – at least, all innocent humanity. This concern about humanity is echoed in a later rabbinical saying: “Whoever destroys one human life in the [holy] scripture ascribes to him as if he had destroyed a whole world; and whoever preserves one human life the scripture ascribes to him as if he had preserved a whole world.”²⁹ The concern for humanity is not a generalization, or an abstraction, but it involves the concern for each and every concrete individual being, every man under his vine and under his fig tree.

The Way to Attain Goodness

The way to attain goodness in ancient Greek philosophical thinking is somewhat complex. It is virtue, or virtues, that are the aim here, and different kinds of virtues may require diverse means and methods. Thus Aristotle makes an explicit distinction between intellectual and moral virtues: “Wisdom and Understanding and Prudence are intellectual, Liberality and Temperance are moral virtues.”³⁰ While intellectual virtues grow through instruction, moral virtues are developed by habit, by the actual exercising of moral behavior. Thus, “we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones.”³¹ One could draw the general conclusion that moral education requires the strengthening of reason on one hand, and the formation of the right habits on the other.

Yet, as we have seen, the activity of reason, according to both Plato and Aristotle, is virtuous – virtuous in the highest sense – also when it is not linked to practical issues of morality. Consequently, the cultivation of logical thinking and of the pursuit of truth and contemplation for its own sake (*theoria*) are most desirable. The intellectual activity of the philosopher constitutes *summum bonum* for the individual – at least, for the individual capable of such an activity. In this sense, pursuit of wisdom is a dynamic pursuit – as symbolized by the indefatigable quest of Socrates – though it aims at absolute knowledge, which is gratifying in revealing the ultimate truth.

Yet, this is not the whole picture. For when Plato addresses his collective ideal, the perfect state, he deliberately deprives the individual of his autonomous reason, and confines the sovereignty of rationality and wisdom to the philosopher-kings. Others, including

the guardians, become passive trainees and their own reason seems suspended for the sake of the collective perfection. With wisdom monopolized by the rulers, with reason turned from an internal to an external authority, the guardians become subject to deliberate manipulation. *Mousike*, the seemingly innocent way of tuning the soul until it reaches the maturity that leads to rational self-rule, becomes a means for molding and forming the soul and behavior of the guardians in perpetuity by the ruling philosophers. The wisdom of the philosophers may, and should, adjust the *mousike* to the objectives of the state. This may involve what we call today conditioning or programming, as well as the creation of deliberate, useful lies.

Thus, to quote but one example, Plato argues that “sweet and soft and melancholy airs” have a “softening” impact on the guardian’s soul, and may turn him into a “feeble warrior.”³² Consequently, these should be banned. Instead, it is advisable to expose the guardians to warlike harmony, “to sound the note or accent which a brave man utters in the hour of danger and stern resolve.”³³

The functioning of the state in general, and the creation of the perfect warrior in particular, will be promoted by creating a deliberate lie, which is justified by being useful to the ideal design of Plato. It amounts to the fabrication of a myth that claims that, while all the citizens are brothers, they were created differently – some have gold mingled in their composition, others silver, and the rest brass and iron. This diversity accounts for and justifies the social-functional stratification of the state. The myth has further ramifications, which need not concern us here.³⁴

To recapitulate the salient feature of the Platonic reasoning, false beliefs and psychological conditioning are preferred to individual critical judgement. The autonomous reasoning of each individual is suppressed in favor of the supreme wisdom of the rulers. All this in the name and for the sake of the perfect state. The Socratic search for truth, and the mission of the philosopher to convince his fellow-citizens to *seek* the clear and distinct truth, without any compromise with or concession to established perceptions and practices, is sacrificed and replaced by the more efficient measures of *imposing* the truth, the ultimate truth of Plato – adapted to each class according to its function.

There is nothing of this sort in the biblical approach. To be sure, the truth about the right conduct is announced by God, or on his

behalf, and is not to be questioned. However, as the true morality is perceived to originate from God, and not from the philosopher-king, and the prophet is no more than a divine spokesman, there is no place for allotting diverse kinds of behavior or belief to people according to their class or station. There is one moral truth, announced to all, perceived by all and binding all. The Ten Commandments and all the other laws apply equally to all. The rich and the poor, the mighty and the humble, are subject to the same commandments. There are no exceptions made for the king, as the story of David and Bath-Sheba, or that of Ahab and Naboth, illustrates. The moral code makes no fundamental distinction between the community and the individuals who compose it. Unlike in Plato's case, the code is applied without guile and deception.

This relative simplicity of the ethical perception of the Bible makes the achievement of the right way seemingly easy. There is no need for a laborious intellectual effort, as pursued by Socrates and advocated by him to his fellow citizens, to find out what virtue is and how to perfect one's soul. To implement morality one has only to comprehend the divine commandments and strictly follow them. This may, of course, require overcoming the tendency to go astray after "other gods," who represent immoral conduct and various abominations, and may require a somewhat rigid stance. This, however, is not an intellectual effort or pursuit, but a determination of the will – open to every individual.

While no philosophical effort is involved in achieving goodness, there is place for teaching and instruction, to make sure that people know what the right way is and remain steadfast in following it. Thus, Moses stresses the importance of such instruction:

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:

And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.³⁵

The passage stresses the significance of assuring continuous observance of the right way by insisting on the instruction of the children by their elders. It also implicitly conveys the trust in attaining the moral aim by the ubiquitous and continuous self and other instruction of the commandments of the Lord.

The insistence on knowing and training oneself in the perfor-

mance of the Lord's commandments is specifically addressed to the kings of Israel, who "shall write him a copy of this law in a book:"

And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them; That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left.³⁶

While this learning of the word of the Lord is presented as a rather elementary acquisition of knowledge and training of will, it becomes increasingly infused with the study and interpretation of the sacred scriptures, and even the amplification of the laws, in the rabbinical literature and in the way of life resulting from this approach. The initial passive absorption of the teaching and the law of the Lord, as revealed to the people of Israel, becomes increasingly an active involvement, a search and pursuit of truth, which is a continuous and apparently unending process. This study becomes akin to the pursuit of knowledge by the Greek philosophers. The ideal of studying the *Torah*, the teaching and law of God, for its own sake, which became pervasive in the rabbinical culture, is clearly reminiscent of Aristotle's contemplative activity that provides its own satisfaction. The Jews become "the people of the book" and their interest in practical affairs a mere sideline due to the material needs of man. Throughout many centuries, the Talmudic scholar, immersed in religious learning for its own sake, is the man of highest achievement and reputation.

While this pursuit of learning seems to follow and resemble the ancient Greek ideal as conveyed by Plato and Aristotle, a significant difference should be noted. The Greek philosophers, consistent with the nature of philosophy, tended to inquire into the *foundations* of things, including the foundations of ethics. The Jewish scholars accepted the law as divine and thereby largely limited the inquiry into its foundations. Their main focus was on the *ramification* of law and ethics, and the *application* of the divine commandments to concrete situations. However, as these situations exhibited variations beyond what had been envisaged in the Pentateuch, the application of the original law and the adjudication of diverse cases and disputes amounted to more than a simple judicial application or a legal commentary. The rabbinical scholars actually were legal innovators on many occasions, and occasionally diverged from the stricter laws of the Pentateuch out of consideration for

humaneness, While the rabbinical scholars regarded themselves as mere interpreters of the divine commandments – for all the law was assumed to be contained in the Pentateuch – in fact they became participatory legislators, and the aura of divine law enhanced the status of the human partners, as it were, to divine legislation. A life devoted to such a scholarly pursuit became a cardinal way to the attainment of perfection.

Thus, it would seem, despite the difference in style and method between the Greek philosophers and the rabbinical scholars, there is a considerable affinity between them. The Judaic pursuit of learning and the immersion in the religious-ethical domain could be likened to the Aristotelian *theoria*, as both suggest the attainment of goodness through contemplation, reflection, and learning. Yet there persists a cardinal difference. For, in the last resort, the Judaic pursuit of knowledge is not detached from human affairs, from individual and social concerns. It does permit itself to contemplate the natural order, mathematical truths, and other pure knowledge. The study of the divine commandments – including their interpretation and amplification – is ultimately related to human needs, and to the benefits of man and society resulting from the right way of conduct. The holy study, to be sure, must not be made “a crown for self-aggrandizement, nor a spade to dig with”³⁷ – a means to benefit the scholar. Rather it ought to be a means for the enactment of righteous behavior. It must be divorced from practical ethical application. A pure, socially indifferent contemplation, as extolled by Aristotle, is not the way to goodness and perfection in the perception of Judaism. The following saying of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa (first century A.D.) reflects this stance: “He whose deeds are more numerous than his wisdom, his wisdom persists; and he whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, his wisdom does not persist.”³⁸

The Divine Connection

The ethical systems and perceptions of both, the biblical-Judaic and the ancient Greek world are linked to religious beliefs. This connection is very pronounced in the Israelite-Judaic case, and more elusive in the Greek philosophy. The examination of the divine link in both systems sheds additional light on the nature of the respective ethical approaches.

In the Bible and rabbinical Judaism, God appears as the origin of

all the laws, commandments, and moral exhortations, as has already been noted. From the revelation at Mount Sinai and the announcements of the Ten Commandments to the admonitions of the various prophets, it is God who is the source and the authority of the moral conduct.

Moreover, the divine origin of legal and ethical commandments not only assures their intrinsic rightness, but also secures the just reward for the righteous and the appropriate punishment for the wicked. God is the guarantor of the just order of the human universe:

And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently upon my commandments.

Then I will give you the rain of your land in his due season and thou wilt gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil.

Take heed that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods.

Then the Lord's wrath will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heaven, and there will be no rain, and the soil will not yield its fruit; and ye will perish quickly from the good land which the Lord giveth you.³⁹

The reward-and-punishment order applies both nationally and individually to Israel, and it is addressed to other peoples, as is implied in the Pentateuch, when the conquest of Canaan by the children of Israel is justified as a punishment for the "wickedness of these nations."⁴⁰ The universal application of divine justice is reiterated by the prophets.⁴¹

This stance, which assumes a strict system of absolute divine justice in the actual control of human affairs, was not easy to maintain in view of the evidence of various cases in which the wicked – whether nations or individuals – prospered and the righteous suffered. The question, expressing doubt about the just order, is raised in Psalms, painfully explored by Job, and reiterated on various occasions in the rabbinical literature in connection with the plight of the nation or the martyrdom of righteous individuals at the hand of the Romans. It may be represented here by one generally formulated query, as posed by Jeremiah: "Righteous art thou, O Lord, that I may address thee with arguments; yet I will talk to thee accusingly: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper and why are the treacherous at peace?"⁴²

Unless one makes an allowance for reward and punishment in the afterlife – a theological refuge which is not taken in the Old

Testament – the issue of the rule of justice in the world in view of human and historical experience remains insoluble. If iniquity in this respect persists, then either God is incapable of enforcing justice, or he is unwilling to do so. In the first case he would not be almighty; in the second case he would not be just.⁴³ While the Bible and Judaism cannot resolve this problem, they are clearly inclined to give preference to God the just over God the omnipotent. Thus, in the story of the confrontation of Abraham with the Almighty over the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham, concerned over the possible iniquity of the death of some righteous inhabitants, virtually admonishes the Lord: "That be far from thee to slay the righteous with the wicked. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"⁴⁴ Two Karaite philosophers of the eleventh century, Joseph ha-Ro'eh (Yusuf al-Basir) and Jeshua ben Judah, take the explicit stand that good and evil are absolute and binding even on God.⁴⁵

This supremacy of right over God, of ethics over theology, may be seen as amounting to the *use* of religious concepts to glorify ethical principles and conduct. God becomes the *personification* of justice and righteousness, of compassion and the right way, rather than the independent entity *confronting* moral principles. Indeed, already the Pentateuch often displays this perception: "And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him. To keep the commandments of the Lord, and his statutes."⁴⁶ The words of the prophet are even more explicit: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good and what doth the Lord demand of thee, but to do justice and love goodness and walk humbly with thy God."⁴⁷

If God is only the personification of the moral principles, why is He necessary at all? Why do not the biblical and Judaic ethics stand on their own, but have recourse to a religious belief? The answer lies in the social utility of the theological foundation. A religious system that provides the awesome power of an almighty God as the source of moral precepts, and that adds the assurance of divine reward for right conduct and punishment for wickedness, is a factor that may affect and shape the community at large. The few elect may not need the divine sanction of morality in order to behave morally; for the masses it may well be indispensable.

This explanation smacks of being the useful lie of Plato, employed for the sake of creating the ideal "holy nation." But then this is an *external* interpretation and not a part of the biblical or

Judaic theology. Certainly, there is no self-exclusion or self-elevation in Judaism of the few elect – whether philosophers or rabbis – who concoct the beneficial myths. The religious element is taken seriously by all, except the odd speculative inquirer.

In the Greek world, the religious link to morality is much less clear than in Judaism. There is no divine revelation, no tables of law handed to man by God, no divine commandments and statutes. Yet, in the Platonic account, Socrates embarks on his search for men wiser than himself and on his quest for wisdom and knowledge as a consequence of a pronouncement of the divine oracle in Delphi that he, Socrates, is the wisest of men.⁴⁸ Still, if the prompting is divine – which may well mean an inspiration unaccountable in simple rational terms – the search is distinctly human, and, in the Greek context of the value attached to wisdom, clearly ethical.

The divine connection reappears, apparently with greater vigor, in Aristotle's ethics. For him, as we have seen, the contemplative activity is the highest virtue and leads to the greatest well-being and happiness (*eudaimonia*). Yet, such an activity is the consequence of a divine element in man. Here man, as it were, reaches beyond himself, even if the capacity to do so is implanted in his nature.⁴⁹ Indeed, the notion that contemplation is a divine activity is closely linked to the Aristotelian concept of god. Here god is not the biblical creator and conductor of the universe and creative interferer in human affairs, distributing reward and punishment. Rather, God is an eternal spirit that is ultimate perfection. Consequently, He does not change, nor does He interfere with other, less perfect, beings. All His activity is thinking, and as there is nothing superior to him, He thinks about Himself only. Nonetheless, He affects the universe, which, looking at Him in His perfection, strives to imitate Him. Thus, god moves the universe without moving or acting Himself.⁵⁰ Man, endowed with the capacity of disinterested thinking, thus participates in divine activity, and the more he does so, the closer he approaches divine perfection.

There is no place in the Socratic or Aristotelian divine connection for reward and punishment meted out to man by God. The reward of the virtuous is in being virtuous. The pursuit of knowledge and wisdom ennobles the soul, which constitutes its reward. The contemplative activity leads to satisfaction and well-being. The vicissitudes of life that may lead to personal suffering are

deplorable, but do not undermine the basic link, the unbreakable connection, between virtue (*arete*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*). As we have seen, Plato goes to great lengths to prove that it is better to suffer evil than to do evil, and while one cannot always avoid suffering, it is in the hands of the individual to abstain from and avoid doing evil. So, in a cardinal sense, virtue is linked to reward, and vice – or absence of virtue – results in a deformed soul, in the lack of human fulfilment, in failure as a human being. The way of the wicked cannot prosper, according to this system. The reward and the punishment do not require any extraneous intervention or sanction; they are inherent to the nature of human conduct.

This is the stance of the philosophers. The perception of mythology, as conveyed in the Greek drama, is quite different. There suffering is presented as bad for the sufferer, and affliction and calamity, rather than being belittled, are often dwelt upon in detail and described in somber scenes. As suffering can be the lot of the virtuous, the issue of the iniquity of the situation cannot be ignored. Moreover, divine power and authority may be involved in the situation, and thus the problem of the relationship between theology and morals reemerges.

Take the case of the myth of Prometheus, as presented in the drama of Aeschylus.⁵¹ Prometheus, though technically a god, represents a certain human type, as most gods do in Greek mythology: he is the wise and compassionate person who is selflessly concerned with the well-being of humanity. According to the drama, Prometheus gives mankind the gift of arts and science and thereby saves it from annihilation. He does it in deliberate contravention of Zeus's order and thus incurs the latter's wrath and terrible punishment.

Prometheus is concerned with the well-being of others, with the recipients of his action, and not with his own, or even their, perfection. In this sense he is in accord with the biblical moral perception rather than with that of the Greek philosophers. Yet, his compassionate act toward humanity, far from being rewarded by God in the Hebrew fashion, is cruelly punished. Obviously, the perception of divinity, as represented by Zeus, has nothing to do with morality. Might and right are separate from each other. Man cannot console himself that fundamentally – if often somewhat mysteriously – god underwrites the moral nature of the universe: that the just are rewarded and the wicked punished. Man finds himself in a moral vacuum, in which the powers that be – whether divine or earthly –

act according to their own wanton will.

Sometimes the perception is that it is not the will of the mighty gods that is in control, but that Necessity (*Anagke*) or the Fates (*Moirae*), to which even Zeus must submit, determine events.⁵² This however, does not make the meaning – the moral meaning – of human life any more palatable. In the face of some blind, incomprehensible and unmovable power, man and his moral quest remain utterly vulnerable. They have no anchor in a just and merciful God, they have no hope of the ultimate vindication of the righteous.

This separation of ethical action from divine protection of and support for its perpetrators, this indifference of the existing order to human behavior, is argued with persistent and painful bitterness also by Job in the Bible. Even if the Book of Job ends on a note vindicating the divine system, the accusation hurled at God by Job keeps reverberating: "He destroyeth the perfect and the wicked."⁵³

Yet the allegation of the indifference of God to the moral conduct of humanity, the sense of alienation of moral man from the universe in which he happens to exist, is not *typical* of the Bible or rabbinical Judaism. It is the exception rather than the rule. Basically, Judaism asserts the moral conduct of the universe and the concern of the just God with the society and the individual. It is the belief, whatever its degree of truth, that has sustained the adherents to Judaism both in their faithfulness to the divine-ethical codes and in their will to continue in their national-cultural existence. Such sustenance could not be provided by the Greek drama, in which the pathos of a heroic act leads to a tragic misfortune, in which the moral deed is separated from the hope of a just recompense.

Conclusion

Greek and Judaic ethical perceptions have widely affected the moral notions of Western civilization. While it is outside the framework of this essay to trace these influences, a few broad indications can be suggested.

The Greek ideal, stressing the perfection of the soul in a manner analogous to and complementing physical health and beauty, reverberates in Juvenal's maxim: *Mens sana in corpore sano*.⁵⁴ The fact that the saying has survived for about nineteen centuries, and "a healthy mind in a healthy body" remains a widely cherished

ideal, testifies to the wide impact of the Greek notion of virtue and excellence that is addressed to the whole human being.

The ideal of the courtier, cultivated in the Renaissance,⁵⁵ and the subsequent and contemporary notion of the gentleman as a chivalrous and well-bred person, also reflect the Greek attitude in its focus on the agent and his excellence.

On the other hand, the awareness of the problems of the poor and underprivileged and the comprehensive social legislation that is the hallmark of the modern state echo and express the Israelite and Judaic concern with the well-being of the recipient of righteous and compassionate acts. Being one's brother's keeper has become, in this respect, an accepted principle of domestic policy in our times. Indeed, this principle is occasionally extended, in a modified form, to send relief to poor people of other nations.

The case of Christian ethics throughout its own long history reveals the influence of both the Israelite and the Greek approach. The former is manifest in the charitable deeds of devout Christians and in the dedication of some monastic orders to helping the poor and the sick. The latter is reflected in the concern for the Christian agent, namely the salvation of his soul. This salvation may be very different in substance from the Socratic and Aristotelian perfection of the soul through knowledge and wisdom, in that it sees religious faith as the means of attaining a moral objective. Yet, it focuses on the agent's virtue, if it may be called that, in a way similar to the Greek model. It may be said, though this is open to debate, that in Christianity the stress on the agent's salvation has been greater than the concern for the well-being of the recipient, other than the salvation of *his* soul.

The divine concern with good and evil, or cosmic indifference to ethical conduct, are two views that have affected and still deeply affect the way people feel about the world. Some, perhaps most, people in the Western world have a basically optimistic view, which tries to reconcile what ought to be with what is, right with might, the desirable with the actual. This is true not only of the religious followers of the monotheistic religions, but also of such secular beliefs as Marxism. For even if those religions and Marxism recognize the actual manifestations of misery and injustice, they provide the consolation of one kind or another of eschatological redemption or salvation.

Not so in the case of such philosophies as existentialism. Here the ethical universe of man is completely separated from the natur-

al order, or rather chaos, of things. Thus, in the novels of Franz Kafka or the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, we can hear the reverberations of the Greek drama of Job. This attitude, in varying degree, is shared by many individuals who fail to find rhyme and reason in the order of nature or moral progress in the history of mankind.

Notes

1. *Aboth*, Chapter II, 1. The tractate is also widely known as *The Wisdom of the Fathers*. An English translation by Judiah Goldin under the title *The Living Talmud* is available in paperback (New York: Mentor Books, New American Library, 1957).
2. Genesis 3:22.
3. Deuteronomy 30:15.
4. Plato, *Apology* 20. All the quotations from Plato follow the Jowett translation. In exploring the exact meaning of some Greek texts I had the advice of my son, Dr. Aviel Roshwald.
5. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* I, vii, 1097b–1098a. The text used is J.A.K. Thomson's translation (Penguin Books revised edition, 1976).
6. *Ibid.* IX, ix, 1170a, 252.
7. To be sure, Aristotle, who coined the dictum that "man is a social (or political) being," could not ignore the normative aspect of human relations. Thus, in discussing justice in *Ethics* V, i, he states that "justice is the only virtue that is regarded as someone else's good" (1130a). Yet, characteristically, even here the stress is on the agent's virtue rather than on the right action, interlinked though these may be. Cf. W.F.R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, 2d ed., Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1980, 182 ff.: "While Aristotle's main object is to describe justice as a virtue of character, the book deals also with a number of connected topics" (which involve action affecting others).
8. Cf. Plato, *Republic* X, 609, where vice is said to affect the soul as disease does the body. See also *Republic* IV, 444. Yet elsewhere, in *Phaedrus* 253–254, Plato speaks of the evil in the soul as a *force* opposed to the good.
9. See Plato, *Republic* III, 410–411, where the physical and "musical" education is discussed. The wider issue of the education of body and soul is discussed by Plato primarily in the *Republic*, but also in other dialogues.
10. Exodus 20:13–17. In the case of adultery, the blemish on the person committing it may be an element in the disapproval, but the offense to

the third party certainly plays a major role in the censure of such behavior.

11. *Apology* 29. The concern of Socrates with one's "improvement of the soul," rather than with good deeds toward others, should not be confused with egoism. For, as will be pointed out later, Socrates is committed to have the citizens of Athens at large pursue this objective, which implicitly suggests altruism. Cf. W.F.R. Hardie, *op. cit.*, 216, where he attempts to refute the characterization of Aristotle's ethics as egoistic. The source of such an allegation is, in my opinion, the confusion of ethics focusing on the agent, and not on the consequences of his action for others, with egoism.
12. Psalms 1:6.
13. The question and the answer are formulated in *Aboth*, Chapter II, 13.
14. See Plato, *Gorgias*, 469–480.
15. See Exodus 22:4, 7 (22:3,6 in the Hebrew Bible).
16. See *Republic* IV, 420–421.
17. See *Meno* 88–89.
18. See *Republic* IX, 571–573. Cf. also *Republic* IV, 439ff. See also *Phaedrus* 253ff.
19. *Republic* V, 473.
20. *Nicomachean Ethics* X, viii, 1178a, 1178b–1179a. Cf. Hardie, *op. cit.*, 218–219, where reference is made to Aristotle's perception of the human soul, including its physiological elements, in *De Anima*.
21. *Ibid.* X,vii, 1177a.
22. *Ibid.* 1177a–b.
23. Leviticus 19:9–10
24. Leviticus 19:15.
25. Isaiah 1:17.
26. Leviticus 19:18.
27. Leviticus 19:17. The translation does not follow the King James version but attempts to convey the meaning of the Hebrew text more faithfully. "Carry a grudge against him" may, however, not be beyond controversy. The literal translation would be "carry sin on him," which has been open to various interpretations. Our own translation is consistent with the commentary of Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 1080–1158), who comments: " 'And thou shalt not carry sin on him'—in your heart."
28. Micah 4:3–4.
29. *The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin*, 37.
30. *Ethics* I, xiii, 42.
31. *Ethics* II, i, 1103a–b.
32. *Republic* III, 411.
33. *Ibid.* III, 399.
34. *Ibid.* III, 414–415ff.
35. Deuteronomy 6:6–7.

36. Deuteronomy 17:18–20.
37. *Aboth*, Chapter IV, 7.
38. *Aboth*, Chapter III, 12.
39. Deuteronomy 11:13–14, 16–17. The King James Version is somewhat modified to render the Hebrew text more exactly.
40. Deuteronomy 9:5.
41. See, as one prominent example, Amos, Chapter 1.
42. Jeremiah 12:1. Translated from the Hebrew text. The King James Version is inaccurate.
43. Cf. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1779, Part X.
44. Genesis 18:25.
45. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1971, Vol. 10, 3, the article on “Jeshua ben Judah.”
46. Deuteronomy 10:12–13.
47. Micah 6:8. The King James Version modified.
48. *Apology* 20–21.
49. Aristotle, *Ethics* X, vii, 1177b–1178a.
50. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072–1074.
51. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*. A recent translation by Philip Vellacott in a volume with three other plays by Aeschylus, published by Penguin Classics, 1961.
52. Cf. *op. cit.*, 24 (75–126) and 35 (484–521).
53. Job 9:22.
54. *Satires* X, 356.
55. See the classical expression of this ideal in Baldassare Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano (The Courtier)*, 1528.