

MAGIC AND DIALECTIC

In the Biblical story of the creation we read (*Gen. 11*): ¹⁹“The Lord in the exercise of His power created from the soil all the wild animals of the field and all the birds (and other animals) that fly in the sky. He brought to the Man to see what name he would give it. Whatever the Man called a living soul, that would be his name. ²⁰The man gave names to all the domestic animals and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild animals of the field; but there was not found a helpmate appropriate to Man.”¹ An early medie-

¹ Some remarks may be in order for this translation. E. A. Speisers translation (*The Anchor Bible, Genesis*, 2nd ed. New York 1964) reads: “¹⁹So God Yahweh formed out of the soil various wild beasts and birds of the sky and brought them to the man to see what he called them; whatever the man would call a living creature, that was to be its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, all birds of the sky, and all wild beasts; yet none proved to be the aide that would be fit for man.” This translation is probably the best representative of Bible scholarship and criticism; my translation is based on traditional principles.

v. 19 It has become the trademark of a “scholarly” approach to vocalize the name YHWH as a kind of *hi’il*. This is a 19th century invention without foundation. Since the name has magic implications, its formation obviously cannot be deduced by reasoning. I prefer to stick to the traditional translation “the Lord.” The usual translation of the word *elohim* is God. However, the Talmud points out that both *elohim* and *yhwh* are attributes rather than names of God and that *elohim* refers to the action of the laws of nature as expression of God’s power, whereas *yhwh* refers to the action of grace outside the limit of the law. Therefore,

val commentary (Midraš Berešit Raba, quoted from ed. Levin-Epstein, Jerusalem, 5712 = 1951/2) reports the following explanation (xvii, 4): “The students asked Rabi Yohanan ben Zarai: It is written (*Gen.* I, 24), ‘And God said, let the earth bring forth living souls according to their species...’ What, then, is the meaning of the verse, ‘The Lord created from the soil...?’ He said to them: The first verse (I, 24) relates to the creation, whereas the second mention (II, 19) refers to the power of the humans over the animal kingdom. This can be seen from the verse (*Deut.* xx, 19): ‘If you will use your power against a city...’” (This means that the word *wayser* should not be derived from the root *ysr*, to create, but from the root *swr*, to behave in an inimical fashion. The best translation of the verse would then be: “The Lord in the exercise of His power forced from the soil all the animals of the field... and brought them under the power of the Man under condition that he would name them.” It is to be noted that the word “he created” appears previously in II, 7 as applied to the creation of Man. There it is spelled *wyysr*, seemingly to exclude

I prefer here to consider *elohim* an adjective to *ywhw* and to translate: The Lord in the exercise of His power.

It may be remarked that the indicator of the accusative *et* is missing before the mention of the wild animals but is present for the birds. According to Rabbⁱ Aqiba, the meaning of *et* cannot be divorced from the conjunctive *it* and, therefore, it hints to an addition to what is said explicitly in the text. I have tried to express this meaning in the parenthesis. Here it may be pointed out that in the next verse the birds are named but, in contrast to the animals, not all of them. This seems to indicate that Man did not achieve mastery over the insects. (Speiser puts in an “all” for the birds on the basis of some of the less literal versions of the Bible; this is a very fashionable “scholarly” device.)

In the next part of the sentence it is not quite clear what was brought to Man. The *Torgum Yerushalmi* (a late Byzantine Aramaic version) translates: “The Lord powerful created all the wild animals, and all the birds of the sky he brought to Man...”

Regarding the last part of v. 19, Speiser remarks that the phrase does riddance to Hebrew grammar; this may well be an indication of its magic meaning.

v. 20 We have remarked earlier the opposite treatment of the birds in verses 19 and 20. These literary finesses are completely lost on biblical scholars. For a striking example, a nice rhetorical figure is achieved in *Gen.* XLVII, 12-13, by the double use of the word *lehem*. Only a completely deaf person can break the figure up by giving verse 12 to source P and verse 13 to J. Similar examples can be multiplied ad lib.

The word *kenegdo* can mean not only *appropriate*, but also *opposite*. A possible translation is “He did not find for the Man a help, to oppose him.” This gives rise to a Talmudical aphorism: If the man deserves it, his wife will be a help. If not, she will be his enemy in his own house.

Magic and Dialectic

a derivation from *swr*. This is similar to the massoretic treatment of *wyr'*, he saw, and *wyyr'*, he feared. The first root is *r'b*, the second *yr'*. Naturally, biblical scholarship cannot take notice of these remarks since it must believe in a theory of sources.) The attitude underlying this commentary is that the knowledge of the right name gives power over the bearer of that name. This attitude is a well-known principle of magic in all its forms. It can be found in folk-tales like that of Rumpelstilzchen. J. G. Frazer, in *The Golden Bough* (quoted from 2nd ed., vol. 1, London, 1900) has made a classical study of this kind of magic. He writes of the Egyptians (p. 446): "For it was believed that he who possessed the true name possessed the very being of god or man, and could force even a deity to obey him as a slave obeys his master." For the same reason, we are told (p. 447): "The city of Rome itself had a secret name which it was unlawful to divulge."

Frazer also points out (p. 449) that "... when all is said and done our resemblances to the savage are still far more numerous than our differences from him..." The present paper will confirm this point of view. In fact, it is the thesis presented here that the recognized forms of dialectics are a thinly disguised form of the word-magic described by Frazer.

For practical purposes, we have to start with a discussion of Greek dialectics. We do that even though we tend to agree with Yehuda ha Levi (*Abu'l Hassan ben Samwil*, Al Khazari, quoted from Y. ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation, *Sefer hakuzari*, ed. Levin-Epstein, Jerusalem, 5706=1945-6; First tractate, n. 63): "You cannot hold the philosophers responsible [for having erroneous opinions concerning the eternity and pre-existence of time, space, and matter] since they are from a people which inherited neither wisdom nor traditions. In fact they are Greeks (Ionians) and Ion was from the sons of Yafet that live in the North. But the wisdom that is an inheritance from Adam and is the wisdom which is preserved only by the divine force in man is to be found only among the descendants of Sem who was the preferred son of Noah; the transmission of this wisdom from Adam was not and will not be interrupted. But there was no wisdom in Greece until they grew strong and copied the wisdom of Persia which in itself was taken from the Babylonians. In those days there were the famous philosophers among them, not before

that time and not after it. In fact, since the Roman conquest there was not in Greece any famous philosopher until this day.”

A study of those Platonic dialogues that deal with definition shows that Plato's realism cannot be called logical. In fact, the assumption underlying the theory of the ideas is not that we try to express the essence of an idea by language but rather that a word is the fixed and immutable label of a reality which is open to anyone who finds the right definition of the word. In the *Phaedrus*, which is one of the few places where an attempt at a description of dialectic is made, it is said that it is the pursuit of the dialectician to engraft and sow words that make their possessors happy to the utmost extent of human happiness. This has to be taken together with the statement in the *Republic* (532) that dialectic is the only way to the nature of things. The inconclusive end of all the dialogues that deal with definition shows that for Plato dialectic is a dream, not a reality. In fact, in the *Euthydemus* he reverses himself and shows that words cannot be given an absolute meaning.

For Aristotle, knowledge also is the knowledge of a name since (*Metaphysics*, vii.vi, 4-6 = 1031 a, b) a *per se* expression is necessarily the same as its essence. This implies the constancy of the genus as described by its name. In particular, man always begets man (*Metaphysics*, vii.vii, 3) and never superman. One may be tempted to attribute this opinion to the facility with classifying words that may be created in Greek. However, a similar tendency may (but not must) be found in *Gen.* 1, 24.

As a side issue one can consider the dialectics of the Talmud² which is based on the explicit assumption that the meaning of words in the Bible is uniquely determined since the language of the Bible is not that of human discourse. The recognition that the elimination of ambiguities presupposes the construction of an artificial language is a great advance over the philosophy of Greek style. However, the inspirational character of the texts again then leads to an identification of the words of the artificial universe of discourse with the action of the laws of nature³ even though it

² See H. Guggenheimer, *Logical Problems in Jewish Tradition*, in *Confrontations with Judaism*, Ph. Longworth ed., London 1966, p. 171-196.

³ See e. g., Yalqut Sim'oni, *Job*, Nos. 923-927 and the traditional interpretation of *Proverbs*, viii, 22-31.

Magic and Dialectic

seems that no knowledge of the course of future events is claimed for the master of the art of language.

The magical character of dialectics is quite obvious in the line of thought which goes from Hegel to Marx and Lenin. Hegel's identification of mind and reality is much more an identification of word and reality and the materialistic turn introduced by Marx just produces an identification of word and history. I am not concerned here with the logic of modern dialectics whose inconsistency has been convincingly shown by M. Aebi,⁴ but with the identification of definition and knowledge. Since it is claimed that the correct dialectical analysis of a situation will give a knowledge of the necessary course of history, the setting of the analysis acquires primordial importance, in particular, since dialectical argument cannot be formalized. In this setting the technique of Lenin, but also of Marx, is quite remarkable. A word is given an exact meaning by a definition, and this, then, is applied. Only the definition usually is arbitrary, and the word is chosen for maximal emotional appeal. For example, according to Lenin, "imperialism" is the same of the most advanced form of capitalism. For today's world, it follows that the orthodox Marxist must consider the United States an imperialist power. Then he will usually proceed to chart his future actions based on the emotional impact of the magic word "imperialist" instead of the neutral meaning hidden behind the original definition. In the same way, the Marxian term "Mehrwert" contains not only the notion of profit but also that of amortisation and capital for re-investment. As a consequence, economic growth in socialist countries cannot proceed by natural accumulation of capital but it must come from money obtained by additional deprivation and suffering of the people. The emotional background of this particular theory is the expectation that only in the Poor can inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, hence the economy must be built the way of the poor and insure that the poor remain poor. For a final example, the notion of contradiction is extended by Lenin, and even more by Mao Tse Tung, to denote practically any phenomenon of diversity. "Every difference in men's concepts should be regarded as reflecting an objective

⁴ A. Aebi, *Kants Begründung der deutschen Philosophie*, Basel, 1947. For an entertaining attempt to give meaning to Leninist dialectic, see G. Klaus, *Einführung in die formale Logik*, Berlin, 1959 (in particular III, 4; IV, 5).

contradiction.” (Mao Tse Tung, *On Contradiction*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1964, p. 11) The pejorative label attached to diversity leads to an assertion of the historical necessity of bloodshed and the totalitarian state. “It is highly important to grasp this fact (namely, that contradictions are resolved antagonistically into new things). It enables one to understand that revolutions and revolutionary wars are inevitable in class society and that without them, it is impossible to accomplish any leap in social development and to overthrow the reactionary ruling classes and therefore impossible for the people to win political power. Communists must... enable the people to understand that social revolution is not only entirely necessary but also entirely practicable, and that the whole history of mankind and the triumph of the Soviet Union have confirmed this scientific truth” (*loc. cit.*, p. 51). We see that Marxist practice, in contrast to its professed theory, is on the level of Balaam’s magic since it asserts that by the use of the appropriate emotionfilled word in the dialectics, the course of events can be changed. I do not question the effectiveness of this kind of magic, today as in antiquity; only it should be recognized as that which it is.

Another kind of dialectics has been used by F. Gonseth as the basis of a theory of knowledge. This (dialectics) is less dialogical than the classic one; it is built on the analogy with the interaction between object and observer in quantum mechanics. For that reason diapoetic might be a better word than dialectic for this theory. The attitude of Gonseth seems to imply that an infinite progression of critical investigations will lead to the recognition of always sharper horizons of reality if a method is used, as in science, that guarantees a reasonable freedom from ambiguity. Naturally, this has to be qualified. Natural language has its inherent ambiguities which are essential for the use of language. (A language cannot really be learned by meaning. The number of possible combinations of words is much too great to be memorized by anybody. Therefore, language can be learned by structure and, in fact, by approximate structure.) An analysis of language in the philosophical sense therefore cannot lead anywhere. Science, and in particular Mathematics, uses artificial languages to express its theories. The language of dialectics is an attempt to build a common metastructure to all mathematical languages. In particular,

Magic and Dialectic

Gonseth's principle of permanence is a formulation of the daily practice of the mathematician. In theory, the introduction of a new symbol creates a new language. In practice, one glosses over the differences between the many strata existing in mathematical formalism. But here also we see that the language creates the world it is describing. In fact, the notion of unpredictable change underlying the idoneist dialectics makes sense only if there does not exist a fixed universe of mathematical discourse. This implies that mathematics as a whole cannot be based on set theory. The development of category theory, unpredictable before its invention, seems to justify this contention born from a language that antedates categories by many years.