



March 2012

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Recommended Citation

Braiterman, Zachary. "Pragmatism and Picture-Thinking: A Liberal Response to Hannah Hashkes." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 7, no. 1 (2012): 89-96. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr/vol7/iss1/6>

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PRAGMATISM AND PICTURE-THINKING: A LIBERAL RESPONSE TO HANNAH HASHKES

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In her essay in this issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*, Hannah Hashkes turns to C. S. Peirce and Emmanuel Levinas to reconsider the tension between autonomy and community in modern Jewish thought. She argues the signal point that “the religious self is not more or less free from a secular self that operates within a scientific community. Both respond, as do Levinas’ ‘I’ and Peirce’s Reasoner, to mental urgencies that generate a search for new laws that allow them to harmonize their experiences.”¹ In responding critically to Haskhes’ essay, I do not want to underestimate the premise at work here. In his own work, Peter Ochs has more than amply shown Peirce to be an invaluable resource for Jewish philosophy. But in her argument against the liberalism of Eugene Borowitz, I fear that Hashkes is unable to sustain the very autonomy that she herself wants to advance. This happens often in conservative and postliberal Jewish political thought when philosophers seek to square a

¹ Hashkes, section 6.

medieval world picture with God at the center with modern liberal political values such as autonomy and individual rights. My own argument is that Jewish philosophy is only as good as the pictures upon which it relies. In Hashkes' essay, the pictures, I fear, are fundamentally askew, the picture of modernity being too flat—as is, I suspect, the picture of tradition and authority.

Is it possible to secure autonomy and heteronomy? The central theoretical promise of Hashkes' essay is her use of Peirce's logical figures of firstness, secondness, and thirdness to sort out the relations between community and individual rights in Jewish philosophy. Hashkes wants to ground tradition in secondness, that effort posited by Peirce which splits up a primary sense of oneness, or non-duality. In her reading, this sudden and compelling interruptive introduction of a second party is the brute action of one acting upon an other. Disrupting any pre-standing unity of cognition or consciousness, secondness stands for heteronomy and revelation, whereas autonomy is secured in the category of thirdness. Thirdness reflects the operation of third parties in applying general rules, which would, among other things, submit the brute heteronomy of secondness to universal rules such as justice or rights.

With Peirce and Levinas, Hashkes asks us to think past the hard binary between orthodoxy and liberalism. Rather than get bogged down in static positions, she persuasively argues that thought should be allowed to move back and forth between the modalities of secondness and thirdness. As I see it, however, the problem with her approach has mainly to do with the application of these logical relations to historical forces, namely "modernity" and "tradition." As theoretical constructs, "modernity" and "tradition" assume the character of pictures that, in the end, verge on caricature. Always, it seems the promise of free and universal values embedded in thirdness is submerged back into the anxieties of secondness and the rhetoric of compulsion.

Modern Picture

Sadly, I am unconvinced by the picture of modernity presented by Hashkes in this essay. To be sure, the picture is not unique to her. A staple

in conservative political theory, it appears often in Textual Reasoning, summed up in the claim made by Hashkes that “[t]he individualistic element of the modern humanistic project set out to ensure that every human being is free to engage in thought experiments and to make practical choices apart from his or her communal affiliation.”² While Hashkes is right to note the importance of individual freedom in modern liberal thought, such pictures are always incomplete insofar as they ignore the central function played by political community in classical liberal thought. The caricature of liberal freedom and liberal individualism cannot account for the fact that Kant, in his essay “What is Enlightenment?,” drew a firm distinction between the freedom of an intellectual to think versus the requirements of practical obedience to political authority. As for Spinoza and Mendelssohn, they both agreed that the state has the right to coerce action. In Jewish philosophy, this anti-enlightenment and postliberal tendency to overemphasize the individualistic component of modernity is used as a negative foil with which to privilege the social component in Judaism. What this ignores is that the pragmatism advanced by Peirce and explored by Hashkes, with its deep American roots, is no less “modern” than the picture of untrammelled freedom.

Community and Judaism are said by Hashkes to represent a form of holism, which she identifies with an “anti-atomistic claim that individuals, in any system, do not stand in isolation. Rather, all individual things are *relata* that obtain their distinctiveness within the context of a relationship.”³ Hashkes argues that this picture of holism “can be viewed as a shift back from a modern atomistic perspective of relationships, modeled after Newtonian physics, to a medieval model of individuation.” This is surely an odd claim, as would be made clear by even a cursory look at early twentieth century theoretical physics, non-Euclidean geometry, the sociological thinking of a Georg Simmel, the abstract art of Kandinsky,

² Idem., section 3.

³ Idem., section 4.

or the Jewish thought of Cohen and Buber. It is a *modern* world-picture which submits the illusion of any solid form, including the illusion of a separate and distinct self or community, to a de-substantialized model of relational dynamics. Moving well beyond the atomism and mechanism of Newtonian physics, what Hashkes considers medieval or postmodern has been modern for at least one hundred years now.

The Total World-Picture of Tradition

Almost invariably, in certain forms of religious thought and of conservative political philosophy, freedom is presented as a “problem.” According to Hashkes, “The problem of freedom in the context of religion arises precisely because an attachment to a religious community is commonly understood to be a much more total and all-encompassing experience than Borowitz’s description allows.”⁴ This old picture of religious life as an all-encompassing lifeform can be found in the writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch and Martin Buber, and in the secularization theory of Peter Berger in *The Sacred Canopy*. It is a picture worth reconsidering. Was Jewish tradition or social history ever “total” in the way it is idealized in this essay and elsewhere? Consider, for example, the tensions between the rabbis, the *am ha'aretz*, and the *Reish Galuta* as fancifully described in the Babylonian Talmud. Consider too the work of Menachem Lorberbaum on the difference between divine law and secular law as recognized within the Spanish legal tradition, or the assertion by Jacob Katz in *Tradition and Crisis* that the communal Jewish law governing life in pre- emancipation eastern Europe was not halakhic. Comprised of multiple social bifurcations, a traditional society would seem to be no simple holistic form.

As her argument with Borowitz makes clear, the model of community with which Hashkes works accords primacy to orthodoxy. According to her, “Orthodoxy is a total immersion in a ‘mental stance,’ and non-Orthodoxy is a sense of affiliation that, both in the emotional and the

⁴ Ibid.

rational sense, is much more loose and forgiving.”⁵ No doubt, there is a lot of truth to this picture. It would nevertheless seem that the immersion made possible within a tightly knit orthodox community is only micro-cosmic. It reflects the crystallization of values that are unique to what Robert Cover calls “*paedeic nomoi*.” The trouble, however, with these kinds of tight communal groupings is that the values that take shape therein are very hard if not impossible to transfer over into the world outside, out into what Cover called an “imperial *nomos*,” whose organization is indeed “loose and forgiving.” As a citizen of the State of Israel, Hashkes knows better than I about the ensuing problems when champions of orthodox religion seek to apply an immersive world-view into the public sphere.

Does Hashkes understand the advantage of non-orthodox Judaism in its more loose and forgiving form? Whether yes or no, she remains nonetheless fixed on the problem of authority. One cannot help but note a fundamental anxiety when she writes:

As with the notion of a ‘Jewish self’ developed by Borowitz, I wonder if the practice of reading tradition while negotiating in an open-ended manner various sets of values can provide the commanding force expected in a religious community. Consequently, while I affirm that textual reasoning contributes immensely to the intellectual religious discourse, other religious institutions, equally essential to the continuation of this very same discourse, may suffer from the resignation of tradition’s authoritative voice.⁶

The concern is that Judaism may not be able to sustain itself in the modern world. Meant to shore up tradition, Hashkes does not understand how direct appeals to the authoritative voice of commanding force may only undermine that very tradition in the modern world, the picture of which, as I have said, is badly misrepresented in her essay.

Hashkes affirms a “total picture” around which to orient contemporary Jewish thought. In her view, “Only a total picture of reality, referring to the given concept of transcendence as the source for its unified

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Idem.*, section 6.

world of experience, can generate continual religious existence.”⁷ In contrast, I would think it almost impossible to live in such a picture, and I do not think any large group ever did for very long, or can do so today without massive subsidies from the secular state. We are invited to enter into a picture that is too static. I would compare it to the picture of tradition that we learned from Scholem. With no single, definable essence, a dynamic picture of tradition would look more like a moving image than the still image presupposed by Hashkes. Religious existence would move from picture to picture, as opposed to remaining absorbed in the presence of one transcendent image. The notion that God occupies unambiguously the center of Jewish tradition is unable to account for more complex pictures in which Torah and its interpretation, or the authority of the rabbis, or the community of Israel, enjoy equal or overriding prominence.

In the end, Hashkes’ picture of the Jewish self is riddled by contradictions that may be irresolvable. The root of the problem is that her picture of the religious world is over-invested in secondness. “Having God at the center of [one’s] gravitation” with such “a strong experience of exteriority,” it is impossible to see how religious thought can move into a dynamic mode of thirdness. On the other hand, she admits that “brute” encounter is not directly accessible to us: “All experience of it is already mediated by icons and symbols that we inherit as part of the specific community of reasoning that we belong to.”⁸ It would therefore seem to be the case that the strong centering force of revelation has always already dissipated. In this case there is no basis for “continual religious experience.” The only way out of this impasse would be to give up the centric picture of religion with God and religious authority at the center of things, and to make room for more acentric pictures. As I see it, there is nothing to fear in this diffusion of religious authority. If there is, there may not be anything to do about it. In the modern period, it is no longer settled as to who controls the interpretation of Torah and who represents the Jewish people.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Conclusion

Finally, the claim by Hashkes that “scientific selves” also have a sense of a “center of gravitation” may or may not be true. The point strikes me as apologetic. Of course, Hashkes is right. All systems, even secular ones, are symbolic. As described by Peirce in his phenomenology of knowledge, “there is no quest of knowledge, hence no discourse of reason without a set of symbols that we already operate in. There is no quest of knowledge without encounters that interrupt the equilibrium between the symbols and our experience.” Indeed, all systems contain fixed and open elements. But not all symbol systems balance out these elements in the same way, as Hashkes has herself argued. Some symbol systems are more open, while others are more hermetic.

Something has to give here, either the clear-order picture of tradition or the more open and networked picture-system of modern science and liberal culture. Hashkes states:

It is clear why I claim that an experience of exteriority that determines the self does not oppose individual autonomy: Equipped with a sense of transcendence and our communal set of symbols, we are all lawmakers, we are all reasoners, and we are all autonomous, as Jewish selves, scientific selves, or ethical selves. The crucial point is that being part of a communal discourse is a condition for our ability to exercise thought and therefore freedom, not a hindrance to it.⁹

I do not see how to secure autonomy on the basis of this picture. Nor do I see how we can all be lawmakers if we are supposed to submit to the clear authority of a commanding presence at the center of things that determines the self from without. And I do not understand how *total* immersion into a centric system allows one to live in “parallel worlds” as Hashkes suggests in her conclusion.

What I learn from Hashkes is a way through the challenge presented by her. The accomplishment of the twentieth century forms of liberal Jewish thought represented by Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Borowitz

⁹ Ibid.

has been the effort to keep transcendence without absolutizing it. The challenge for liberal religious thought is how to make a model of religious authority that “commands” or “commends” itself with much more artful indirection than the one presented by its conservative critics. As a type of modernism, liberal Jewish thought rested on a basic “core.” It may be that models based on core versus form, shell, or skin have lost the force they once enjoyed. A postmodern form of liberal religious thought would make for acentric models of religion and religious authority. It would allow thought to move in a more fluid way across surfaces, between the secondness of sensed divine presence and the thirdness of individual autonomy and lived life in a pluralistic society. It is up to us, then, to set up religious thought and culture in ways that are not absolute, but rather pragmatic.