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SPINOZA AND KAPLAN:
TWO NATURALIST THEOLOGIANS, THEIR THEOLOGIES, AND SOME IMPLICATIONS THEREOF

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Digest

In this modern age that has seen the widespread acceptance of pluralistic, non-Orthodox approaches to dogma and ritual, the naturalistic thought of both Spinoza and Kaplan has assumed increasing importance. Both Spinoza and Kaplan rejected the supernatural world view inherent in Orthodox Judaism (and Christianity and Islam) and argued instead for a naturalist world view. Both felt, however, that such a world view did not preclude a concept of God or a role for religion. Thus both (each in their own fashion) constructed a naturalist theology, one in which their respective God-concepts were thoroughly coherent with a naturalist world view. They did not stop at their God-concepts, however. Each went on to construct a complete system in which traditional areas of religious concern were reinterpreted in light of their respective naturalist God-concepts. This thesis explores their respective theologies and some of the conclusions each drew regarding these areas of religious concern. This thesis begins by examining the respective epistemologies of Spinoza and Kaplan and then moves on to explore the God-concept each thinker espoused, showing the connection between their respective epistemologies and their God-concepts. It then goes on to look at how each thinker's respective God-concept influences the conclusions drawn by each thinker in six main areas: ethics, soteria

(defined as how humans are able to achieve ultimate meaningful existence), the doctrine of the chosenness of the Jewish People, the role and status of Scripture, the role and status of ritual, and the role and status cf religion. Throughout this thesis the ideas of each thinker are evaluated and compared, and it concludes with the idea that both these thinkers can serve as possible models for the modern Jew who has problems with supernaturalism similar to those that Spinoza and Kaplan had.

Chapter 1: Kaplan and Spinoza

Ever since the Emancipation and the rise of the scientific world view, Judaism (along with the other Orthodox western religions)[1] has faced a crisis. The tenets of the supernatural world view espoused by these religions has come under increasing scrutiny, and more and more these tenets are being rejected by the vast majority of people.[2] The reason for this is simple - the supernatural world view finds itself in increasing conflict with the fundamental assumptions of the modern age.

The modern age is dominated by the naturalist world view, a view that holds that all that takes place in the universe is the product of natural forces, forces that can be understood (at least in principle) by the human mind. All events, objects, and ideas that exist, exist in accordance with fundamental natural laws, laws that cannot be canceled,

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[1] The primary focus in this thesis will be on Judaism, but what is said here is also true for the other western religions, Christianity and Islam. The problems created by the modern age for these three religions most likely also apply to any supernatural religion that exists in the world, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to say with any certainty how non-western supernatural religions are affected by the modern age.

[2] While it is overly simplistic to speak of Judaism and the other western religions as being completely unified, monolithic bodies throughout their history, the focus of this thesis is the reaction of two thinkers to the supernatural world view espoused by these religions in their most well known forms. Thus the names of these religions will be used to refer to Orthodox (Pharisaic) Judaism, Orthodox Islam, Catholicism and fundamental Protestantism.

changed, or suspended.[3] There exist no beings or entities outside the natural order, and certainly there is no outside will that can interrupt or effect a change in the natural order merely by desiring it. The whole of the natural order is intelligible, whether through reason or experiment, and knowledge of the natural order can be used to make predictions and effect changes in it.

All of this is radically different from the traditional supernatural view of the universe. This view holds that there exists a Deity who has created the universe and all that is in it. This leads to certain conclusions, as Reines explains

> 1. There is a theistic God[4] who has created everything besides himself that exists, namely, the universe and all it contains.
> 2. By the very act of having created them, the theistic God owns all persons and things, and owning them, therefore, possesses absolute authority over them.
> 3. The theistic God, consequently, possesses absolute authority over humankind.
> 4. Exercising his absolute authority, the theistic God through a revelation has issued commandments that humankind in general or some particular religious community must obey.

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[3] This should not be taken to imply that human understanding of these natural laws cannot change. Human beings may misrepresent or modify the models that they use to represent natural law, but underlying these models is the assumption that at some fundamental level there are in fact natural laws that are unchangeable and that these laws can be used to predict events in the universe.

[4] This God can be absolute (theistic absolutism) or finite (theistic finitism), but in both cases God has created the universe and exercises power over it. The main difference between the two is that in the former God has absolute (infinite) power, so that nothing happens in the universe against God's will, while in the latter God has His power limited (finite) in some way. In both cases though, God is a person (in the philosophical sense of possessing an independent will) who is the supernatural creator of all. As such, God is outside the normal order of the universe.

5. The theistic God, also in this revelation, has delegated elements of his absolute authority to a religious leader, hierarchy, or community as a whole that gives them the right to compel humankind or the individual members of a religious community to obey the theistic God's commandments.

6. Therefore, inasmuch as the religious leader, hierarchy, or community as a whole acts with the absolute authority delegated to them by the theistic God, humankind or the individual members of the religious community must surrender all or certain portions of self-authority to the leader, hierarchy, or community as a whole, and obey the commandments that issue from them.[5]

All three western religions share this view in common, with the only disagreements being the nature of the Godhead, the source of the revelation, the specific commandments involved and who has the authority. For Judaism, the source is the Torah (plus, to a lesser extent, the rest of the Bible and the Talmud), for Christianity the Old and New Testaments, and for Islam the Quran. While they do not agree at all on matters of dogma and doctrine, the differences are trivial compared to their similarities when it comes to the purposes of this thesis. All three agree on the supernatural world view, which Kaplan explains

> "Supernaturalism" is here used in the specific sense of the suspension of natural law to make possible the occurrence of events which God himself brings about, to reward or punish, to help or hinder, human beings in their particular strivings, according as these are in keeping with, or contrary to, His will.[6]

And God's will, of course, is known through the revelation that He has provided through his messengers or His duly

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[5] Polydoxy, pg.17

[6] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.16

appointed representatives.

It should be obvious how radically different this view is from the naturalist view. The two are polar opposites and have nothing in common. Therefore it should not be surprising that in the modern age, an age dominated by the naturalist world view (and its reliance on the scientific method), many people have great trouble believing the claims of supernatural religion. This problem is compounded by the fact that the reliability of the sources for the supernatural world view (of the three western religions) has been thrown into doubt. Modern scholarship has demonstrated to the satisfaction of most people that both Bibles and the Quran are human documents, produced by human beings over varying periods of time in a variety of cultural settings. It is very difficult (if not impossible) to reconcile the fact of the human origin of these documents with the documents' claim to being the infallible revelation of the theistic Deity. This has caused a variety of responses, ranging from throwing out the entire structure to the gamut of liberal religions.[7] It has also caused the rise of naturalist theologies and religions, in which the idea of God has been changed to conform with the basic principles of naturalism.

The respective theologies of Benedict Spinoza and

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[7] Including, but not limited to: Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism, Liberal Protestantism, Liberal (largely American) Catholicism and Unitarianism. As far as I am aware, there does not yet exist an official, liberal form of Islam.

Mordecai Kaplan represent this latter tendency. Although Spinoza lived before the modern age, in many respects he was a man much ahead of his time, and he was responding, as was Kaplan, to the difficulty of reconciling the naturalist world view with the claims of supernatural religion. For both Spinoza and Kaplan, the naturalist world view was the correct one, and this automatically made the claims of supernatural religion false. At the same time, both were religious men[8], and refused to concede that the term God or the religious enterprise had no meaning whatsoever. Their task, therefore, was to present a naturalist theology, one in which the term God and some of the traditional areas of concern of religion still had meaning.

Spinoza and Kaplan had more in common than merely naturalist theology. Despite the differences in time and place, their lives show some interesting parallels. Spinoza was born in Amsterdam on November 24, 1632.[9] He was well educated, receiving a thorough and traditional Jewish education.[10] In fact, his teachers were two of the greatest Rabbis of the time, Saul Morteria and Manasseh ben Israel.[11] He was an excellent student, and at the behest of ben Israel

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[8] In the non-traditional sense, of course. However, both saw themselves as religious men (according to their own understanding of the term), a self-assessment that I agree with.

[9] Allison, pg.15

[10] Ibid, pg.18

[11] Ibid, pg.18

began secular studies in 1652 with Francis Van Den Ende.[12] He was, according to all expectations, supposed to become a rabbi in the Amsterdam community, but at some point Spinoza began to feel the conflict between the (to him) absurd claims of the Jewish tradition and what he had learned of the world of science and philosophy.[13] Spinoza began to make his views known, causing great consternation in the Amsterdam Jewish community. The exact details of what happened, the hows and whys, are still a subject of controversy[14], but the upshot is that Spinoza was formally excommunicated from the Jewish people on July 27, 1656.[15] Spinoza went on to become a lens-maker, living a simple life and beginning to discuss with others the aspects of his philosophy.[16] His fame grew and he began to attract a circle of followers and engage in correspondance with the most famous minds of the time, sharing both philosophic and scientific ideas.[17] He moved around a bit, and began work on his various philosophic treatises. With the exception of Principles of the Philosophy of Rene Descartes (published in 1663) and The Theological Political-

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[12] Ibid, pg.18

[13] Ibid, pg.19

[14] Ibid, pg.20

[15] Ibid, pg.21. The ban on Spinoza is still in effect today, as it has never been rescinded.

[16] Ibid, pg.22

[17] Ibid, pg.22

Tractate (published anonymously in 1670) all of his works, including his masterpiece, The Ethics, were published posthumously.[18] Spinoza made quite a name for himself, and except for defending himself against the controversies his ideas caused[19], lived a quiet life in which he kept much to himself. He died in 1677, in accordance with his principles, not belonging to any sect or church.[20]

Kaplan was born in a small town in Lithuania in June, 1881.[21] He came to America in 1888 and, like Spinoza, Kaplan studied with the most famous Rabbis in his area (his father was also a Rabbi), receiving rabbinical ordination from Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines in 1908.[22] As a teenager, he was exposed to the ideas of Biblical criticism by Arnold Erlich, a man who was considered at the time to be quite a heretic.[23] In addition, Kaplan studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the morning and at the City College of New York in the

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[18] Ibid, pp.30-36

[19] Especially after the publication of The Theological-Political Tractate. Even though it was published without his name on it, it did not take long for people to figure out he was its author (a testimony to the fame [or infamy] his philosophy created for him), and he constantly had to defend himself against charges of atheism and heresy.

[20] Ibid, pg.36

[21] Scult in Dynamic Judaism, pg.3

[22] Ibid, pg.3

[23] Ibid, pg.4

afternoon.[24] In 1900, he began work on an M.A. degree at Columbia University, focusing on the areas of philosophy and sociology.[25] He served for a few years as a congregational "Rabbi"[26], but was unhappy, and in 1909 went to work for the Jewish Theological Seminary (where he taught until 1963).[27] In the years 1914-1916 he began to make his naturalist views known, and depending on who was listening was either considered a hero or a heretic.[28] Throughout the remaining years of his life he was engaged in forming and supporting institutions dedicated to his Reconstructionist version of Judaism, writing many books about his thoughts, and teaching his ideas at the Jewish Theological Seminary.[29] In June, 1945 he was excommunicated by the Orthodox for his Reconstructionist Sabbath Prayer Book.[30] He continued to speak out in support for his Reconstructionist view of Judaism, and died in 1983 at the age of 102.[31]

So both Spinoza and Kaplan, Jews who had thorough

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[24] Ibid, pg.4

[25] Ibid, pg.4

[26] Since he was not yet ordained, technically he was not a Rabbi, but he functioned as "minister" at one of the more prominent Orthodox congregations in the city.

[27] Scult in Dynamic Judaism, pg.6

[28] Ibid, pg.7

[29] Ibid, pp.7-10

[30] Ibid, pg. 11

[31] Ibid, pg.12

traditional backgrounds, decided that traditional Judaism was irreconcilable with the way they viewed the world. In reaction, both created naturalistic theologies and in response to the ideas they put forth, both were excommunicated from the Orthodox community.

But there is more to their theologies than the fact that they got them both excommunicated. It is self-evident that the theology a particular thinker has will influence all the theologic and religious conclusions that the thinker reaches. For instance, if one believes that God created the universe and revealed commandments at Mt. Sinai, then one would conclude that such commandments must be obeyed (or if they are not, that one is guilty of sin). Similarly, if one denies the existence of any supernatural Deity, one is not likely to claim that the Torah was dictated by that Deity, for this would involve a logical impossibility.[32] Thus theology lies at the root of a whole host of conclusions, especially when the thinker in question sees his task as "setting religion straight", as both Spinoza and Kaplan did. Both agreed that theistic theology was untenable, but as mentioned above, both thought they could replace it with a natural theology that would still leave religion intact, if different in form.

As it would be impossible to focus on all aspects and conclusions of both these systems, only the most important will be dealt with here. This thesis will begin by exploring

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[32] Namely, how can a non-existent entity dictate anything?

the respective epistemologies of Spinoza and Kaplan, in order to examine how each thinker justifies the conclusions that he reaches. It will then go on to examine the actual theologies of Spinoza and Kaplan, in order to see how they have arrived at a fully naturalistic concept of God. Following that, it will look at some conclusions that follow from the God-concept of each thinker in areas of great religious concern, namely: ethics, soteria[33], the doctrine of chosenness of the Jewish people, the role and status of Scripture, the role and status of ritual, and the role and status of religion. In some areas, the conclusions reached will seem radically different from what is taught by supernatural religion, and in others, hauntingly familiar, albeit with a different foundation.

All of this is presented in the hope that the modern Jew, faced with the same predicament of modernity that Spinoza and Kaplan faced, can see in their respective systems models which can be used as examples for the working out of his or her own personal theology. Neither system is perfect, but both are complete and well thought out. Both are respectable attempts at a very difficult task. Neither Spinoza nor Kaplan thought that the death of supernaturalism meant the death of religion, and neither should the modern Jew.

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[33] As coined by Reines, the term refers to ultimate meaningful existence. A more complete definition will be provided in Chapter 6.

Chapter 2: The Epistemology of Kaplan

Epistemology is defined as the study of knowledge, and in philosophical usage the term is basically used to describe the study of such questions as "How do we (as humans) know something?", "Can something be truly known?", and "What is our basis for saying something is known or not known?"[1] Epistemology is the key to understanding any philosophic system, for a complete understanding of someone's thought requires some understanding of how a given thinker justifies the conclusions reached - in other words, some understanding of how the thinker knows what he or she claims to be the case is required. While different philosophers place different emphases on the importance of epistemology, all have some type of epistemology at the basis of their thoughts.[2]

Naturally, Spinoza and Kaplan are no exceptions. Their epistemological systems underlie their thought and are at the root of their respective understandings of God, religion, and the soterial life. It is essential to know where they are coming from in order to understand the arguments they make. For this reason, any discussion of Kaplan's or Spinoza's God-concepts must begin with their respective epistemologies.

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[1] While this is no means an exhaustive list of the questions asked by epistemology, it does serve to give an idea of the kinds of questions epistemology is concerned with.

[2] The epistemology of a given thinker may be implicit or explicit in their thought, but nevertheless it is there.

Philosophically, Mordecai Kaplan is an pragmatist, who holds that the key to knowledge lies in experience, and in the interaction between the knower and the known. Pragmatism was the most influential philosophy in America in the first quarter of the twentieth century[3] (the time at which Kaplan began his thinking) and is "to be viewed as a group of associated theoretical ideas and attitudes developed over a period of time and exhibiting - under the influences of Peirce, James and Dewey - rather significant shifts in direction and in formulation".[4] While these shifts and currents of understanding are important for the history of philosophy, from the point of view of Kaplan's world view they are minor differences, for Kaplan was not strict in his technical philosophic approach to the problems he was addressing. Kaplan borrowed from the entire pragmatic school of thought in formulating his theology and view of Judaism; sometimes utilizing an idea of Peirce's, sometimes an idea of James', and then sometimes an idea of Dewey's. Even though he was well versed in philosophy (among other sciences), Kaplan was not a philosopher, and he did not consider it necessary to explain his theoretical foundations except as they came up point by point in the arguments he was making. This creates a problem in methodology. If Kaplan did not explicitly state his epistemological base, how can it be explored?

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[3] Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Pragmatism", pg.430

[4] Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Pragmatism", pg.431

Fortunately, Kaplan's basic philosophic approach is one that is easy to determine. He drew heavily on the process philosophy of John Dewey, so much so that some of his arguments are practically verbatim to things that Dewey argued, with the only difference being that Kaplan talked about them within the specific context of Jewish revival and reconstruction. It seems then, that an explanation of Dewey's epitemological system is in order. The parallels between Dewey's system and Kaplan's thought will be evident, and it will be easy to show that in all of its essentials, the epistemology of Dewey and Kaplan are one and the same. As Goldsmith says

> Mordecai Kaplan's interpretations of Judaism may be viewed as a Jewish synthesis of the empirical approach to religion, pragmatic philosophy, and pluralistic process theology found in the writings of such twentieth-century philosophers and theologians as William James, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, Henry Nelson Wieman, Douglas Clyde Macintosh, Charles Hartshorne, Schubert M. Ogden, and John B. Cobb Jr. This modernistic orientation to religion is characterized by openness and tentativeness.[5]

Dewey's system lies at the root of Kaplan's thought.[6] Any examination of Kaplan's thought must begin there.

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[5] Goldsmith, pg.20

[6] While James and Peirce were also influences by virtue of the fact that they helped to originate the pragmatic approach in philosophy, it is clear from reading Kaplan that it was Dewey's explanation of pragmatism that was the most influential. Where Kaplan agrees with James and Peirce is also where Dewey agrees with James and Peirce, and when it comes to the crux of the issue - whose definition of truth is to be used - Kaplan uses Dewey's. One interest, however, Kaplan clearly got from James, and that is his interest in the import of metaphysical and theological world formulae in the life of the individual.

Dewey begins his epistemological analysis by arguing that for centuries philosophy has been engaged with the wrong problem. The problem with prior epistemologies, he says, is that they seek to divorce experience from theory and create an artificial division between the knower and the known, a division that simply does not exist in the real world. As Dewey says

> ...the traditional account [of experience] is derived from a conception once universally entertained regarding the subject or bearer or center of experience. The description of experience has been forced into conformity with this prior conception; it has been primarily a deduction from it, actual empirical facts being poured into the moulds of the deductions...The essential thing is that the bearer was conceived as outside the world; so that experience consisted in the bearer's being affected through a type of operations not found anywhere in the world, while knowledge consists in surveying the world, looking at it, getting the view of a spectator.[7]

Because the bearer was conceived as outside the world, Dewey argues, the whole question of the "problem of knowledge" arose: how do we know what we know, and when can we say we have certain knowledge? Note that Dewey only speaks about this problem in relation to general knowledge - that is, the theory of knowledge, for he argues that no one, including philosophers, has ever had a problem with instances of specific knowledge. As he says,

> Specific problems are about right conclusions to be reached - which means, in effect, right ways about going about the business of inquiry. They imply a difference between knowledge and error consequent upon right and wrong methods of inquiry and testing; not a difference between experience and the world. The problem of

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[7] Dewey, pp.40-41

> knowledge *uberhaupt* exists because it is assumed that there is a knower in general, who is outside of the world to be known, and who is defined in terms antithetical to the traits of the world.[8]

So, Dewey argues, the logical response to this is for philosophers to look again at their basic assumptions and to realize that the problem is not really a problem at all - it is merely an artifice created because the wrong question has been asked for so long a time. In Dewey's words

> Can one deny that if we were to take our clue from the present empirical situation, including the scientific notion of evolution (biological continuity) and the existing arts of control of nature, subject and object would be treated as occupying the same natural world as unhesitatingly as we assume the natural conjunction of an animal and its food? Would it not follow that knowledge is one way in which natural energies co-operate? Would there be any problem save discovery of the particular structure of this co-operation, the conditions under which it occurs to best effect, and the consequences which issue from its occurrence?...Is it not time that philosophers turned from the attempt to determine the comparative merits of various replies to the questions to a consideration of the claims of the questions?...Why not recognize that the trouble is with the problem?[9]

Thus, according to Dewey, it is time for a whole new understanding of what knowledge is, one that takes into account the dynamic between the knower and the known.

This dynamic, Dewey argues, lies in a subtle distinction between experience and knowledge. Experience does not equal knowledge, but rather knowledge is a qualitative understanding and reflection upon experience. Dewey is equally unhappy with

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[8] Dewey, pg.42

[9] Dewey, pp.42-44

a purely subjective understanding of knowledge. As he says,

> ...dreams and hallucinations, errors, [etc...] do not occur save where there are organic centers of experience. They cluster about a subject. But to treat them as things which inhere exclusively in the subject; or as posing the problem of a distortion of the real object by a knower set over against the world, or as presenting facts to be explained primarily as cases of contemplative knowledge, is to testify that one has still to learn the lesson of evolution in its application to the affairs in hand...experience is not identical with brain action; it is the entire organic agent-patient in all its interaction with the environment, natural and social...experiencing *is* just certain modes of interaction, of correlation, of natural objects among which the organism happens, so to say, to be one. It follows with equal force that experience means primarily not knowledge, but ways of doing and suffering. Knowing must be described by discovering what particular mode - qualitatively unique - of doing and suffering it is.[10]

There is no such thing, for Dewey, as a subjective (as opposed to an objective) experience. Experiences simply <u>are</u>, and the real question is what <u>consequences for future events</u> the experiences have. Dewey uses the example of a hallucination to illustrate his point. A given person has a hallucination - that hallucination is real and natural, as real and as natural as a thunderstorm. Subjectivity and objectivity are irrelevant - what needs to be dealt with is the fact of the hallucination. For Dewey, the real question is the future consequences, good or bad, for which that fact is used. If the person uses the hallucination as an indicator of some type of organic lesion in the brain, and then consults a doctor to see if it can be healed, then there is the beneficial or "good" result of the hallucination allowing a person to see

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[10] Dewey, pp.44-45

that they are in some way not healthy. If, however, the person decides (in the case of paranoia) to respond to the hallucination with consequences that follow from a feeling of persecution, then the person has fallen into error and has a "bad" result. The hallucination is still real - what isn't real are the predictions of the future consequences that resulted from that hallucination. Thus, Dewey argues, the "unreality" of the persecution is not a subjective matter - it is just a matter of the fact that "conditions do not exist for producing the *future* consequences which are now anticipated and reacted to."[11] Thus, there is no room for subjectivity and objectivity (at least as they are traditionally understood) in discussions of knowledge. Experiences simply happen, and knowledge consists in reflecting on those experiences in terms of what their future consequences might or might not be.

Dewey provides one more example to make clear how he wants to totally redefine the epistemological problem. He gives the example of the sphere that presents itself to one observer as a flat circle and to another as a distorted elliptical surface. This case, he points out, is often used to show the difference between reality and mere appearance. Since there is only one object, the only difference in the two cases is the presence of two subjects, and since the real object appears differently, this proves that the subject is

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[11] Dewey, pg.47

providing some sort of distorting action or at least that there is a real problem of knowledge present.

Dewey argues, however, that this is not the case. First he points out that the laws concerning the refraction of light are such that we would be surprised if two unlike appearances didn't appear. This is a purely natural result, and has nothing to do with the observer, since a photograph (surely a record produced by an "objective" observer) would produce exactly the same result. Yet some would still maintain that there is a problem in gaining true knowledge of the sphere. This occurs, Dewey claims, because of a confusion that holds the problems in seeing the sphere have something to do with *knowing* when in fact they do not. As he says

> The relation in question is not one between a sphere and a would-be knower of it, unfortunately condemned by the nature of the knowing apparatus to alter the thing he would know; it is an affair of the dynamic interaction of two physical agents in producing a third thing, an effect...To regard the eye primarily as a knower, an observer, of things, is as crass as to assign that function to a camera. But unless the eye be so regarded, there is absolutely no problem of observation or of knowledge in the case of the occurrence of elliptical and circular surfaces. Knowledge does not enter into the affair at all till *after* these forms of refracted light have been produced. About them there is nothing unreal. Light is really, physically, existentially, refracted into these forms...Why talk about *the real* object in relation to *a knower* when what is given is one real thing in dynamic connection with another real thing.[12]

Thus, Dewey says, there needs to be a whole new way to look at knowledge, one that takes into account the findings of science and throws out the old false dichotomy between the knower and

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[12] Dewey, pg.50

the known, as if the knower was not part of the natural order.

Now that Dewey has torn down all previous conceptions of what knowledge is, what does he replace it with? Basically, for Dewey, knowledge is defined as "a matter of the use that is made of experienced natural events."[13] For Dewey, all events are natural, and they are all experienced in dynamic interaction - what ends up mattering is how one uses those experiences. His approach is one of pragmatism - experience will lead to a reflection upon events, that reflection will lead to new actions upon those events, and those new actions will then in turn lead to new events and the process begins again. When humans begin to forecast consequences, to see objects and events in relation to a greater whole - when they begin to give objects or events meaning - then they become objects of knowledge, and this knowledge produces real changes in the real world that then leads to new consequences and a new process. As Dewey explains

> In the attitude of suspended response [to a stimulus] in which consequences are anticipated, the direct stimulus becomes a sign or index of something else - and thus a matter of noting or apprehension or acquaintance, or whatever term may be employed. This difference (together, of course, with the consequences which go with it) is the difference which the natural event of knowledge makes to the natural event of direct organic stimulation. It is no change of a reality into an unreality, of an object into something subjective; it is no secret, illicit, or epistemological transformation; it is a genuine acquisition of new and distinctive features through entering into relations with things with which it was not formerly connected - namely, possible and future things...Consequences occur whether

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[13] Dewey, pg.53

> one is aware of them or not; they are integral facts in experience. But let one of these consequences be anticipated and let it, as anticipated, become an indispensable element in the stimulus, and then there is a known object. It is not that knowing *produces* a change, but that it *is* a change of the specific kind described...Because of this change, an *object* possesses truth or error (which the physical occurrence as such never has); it is classifiable as fact or fantasy; it is a sort or kind, expresses an essence or nature, possesses implications, etc., etc...Visible water is not a more or less erroneous presentation of H2O, but H2O is a knowledge about the thing we see, drink, wash with, sail on, and use for power...Treating knowledge as a presentative relation between the knower and object makes it necessary to regard the mechanism of *presentation* as constituting the act of knowing.[14]

Thus Dewey offers a whole new idea of knowledge. Reality simply is, and there in no understanding it or moving within it without taking the whole context of life, its every facet, into account.

One last point needs to be made, however. While Dewey acknowledges that all things that happen are equally real, he does not agree that all happenings are of equal worth. He is a pragmatist, and believes that any understanding of reality (whether physical, societal, ethical, etc...) must be put to the test of the consequences it produces. An understanding of nature that has less predictive power than another one is inferior - it is equally real, but pragmatically does not meet the test. This does not mean that whatever works, in a Machiavellian sense, is best. What it does mean is that consequences vary, and an awareness of that fact will allow humanity to move throughout the world in an intelligent,

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[14] Dewey, pp.54-56

purposive way rather than in a brute physical way.[15] Ideally, this guided movement will allow people to strive for desirable ends rather than undesirable ends, but in the end that has to be up to the people involved. Knowledge is not an ironclad entity located somewhere out there - rather it is a process created by people interacting with nature, and thus knowledge (in its philosophical sense) can actually change as people learn more and more about the world in which they live (the social and ethical worlds are included in this also) and as hopefully they mature.

In order to see how indebted Kaplan is to Dewey's philosophy, it is necessary to examine one more aspect of Dewey's thought: the relation between thought and context. Dewey's position is that there is no thought (and consequently no knowledge) independent of context. Even when grand generalizations are made, there is always an underlying cultural context that makes the generalization intelligible. Without such a background, ideas are meaningless, and no true knowledge can be achieved. As Dewey says

> [My example shows]...the indispensability of context for thinking...What is true of the meaning of words and sentences is true of all meaning...For the meaning of symbols is not inherent but derived. This appears from the fact that they *are* symbols...Continued and systematic discourse enables us to determine the meaning of special symbols within the discourse only because it enables us to build up a nonverbal and nonsymbolic context to which the whole refers...thought lives, moves, and has its being in and through symbols, and, therefore, depends for meaning upon context as do the

[15] Dewey, pg.62

> symbols. We think *about* things, but not *by* things...every occurrence is a *con*currence. An event is not a self-enclosed, self-executing affair - or it is not save by arbitrary definition...The temporal background of thinking in any case is intellectual as well as existential...There is no thinking which does not present itself on a background of tradition, and tradition has an intellectual quality that differentiates it from blind custom. Traditions are ways of interpretation and of observation, of valuation, of everything explicitly thought of. They are the circumambient atmosphere which thought must breathe; no one ever had an idea except as he inhaled some of this atmosphere...This contextual setting is vague, but it is no mere fringe. It has a solidity and stability not found in the focal material of thinking. The latter denotes the part of the road upon which the spotlight is thrown. The spatial context is the ground through which the road runs and for the sake of which the road exists. It is this setting which gives import to the road and to its consecutive illuminations. The path must be lighted if one is not to lose his way; the remoter territory may be safely left in the dark.[16]

Though this concept is relatively simple, its implications are profound, for it places limits on what and how much can be known at any given time. In effect, the relationship between thought and context provides a selection criterion for the things that can be inquired about and put through the knowledge process as Dewey describes it. As Martland explains

> The question is in effect: is there not a criterion for selection that transcends the personal schemes in order to obtain personal ends? Dewey's answer is yes. The dominant problems and conceptions of the culture of the times as well as its own nature restrict the organism in achieving its personal ends. These restrictions express the fact that the process of inquiry [Dewey's term for how knowledge is achieved] is social as well as personal. It reflects and embodies the experiential continuum which both biological and cultural conditions establish...There is no such thing as an instantaneous inquiry and there is no such thing as a judgement (the conclusion of inquiry) which stands apart from what goes before and comes after. Inquiry is a progressive and

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[16] Dewey, pp.90-101

> cumulative re-organization of antecedent conditions and it must take into consideration the obvious facts of attention and interest on one side and the working of established and assured habits on the other. Selection is therefore restricted to only those possibilities which are actualizations of the natural fulfillments with which progress finds itself beginning and of those which are humanly relevant, fulfillments of human preferences. All thought processes commit themselves to satisfying these fundamental conditions. In effect, interests and conditions provide the direction as well as the restriction...In this way habits [social or otherwise] play the dual role of structure and process. They are the instruments by which we are to experience anew and eventually know, yet at the same time they are a product of past experience. They effect a reorganization of the past experience and at the same time act in their particular way because of that past experience. By means of habit, the creative vision that modifies the old past experience becomes the organ that perceives the new experience, yet it is always aware of the customs, cultural conditions and social groups of the old.[17]

Thus it is clear that: 1] context is critical to any full understanding of what constitutes knowledge, 2] without knowledge no process or progress is possible, and 3] that it is the past that provides the context within which thought, knowledge and progress take place.

Of course, Dewey's approach is open to a major criticism. Dewey is unable to define in any objective manner what he means by 'desirable ends' as opposed to 'undesirable ends'. In the final analysis, the pragmatic test <u>is</u> Machiavellian, for if I get useful results from an (apparently) morally horrid idea, then my idea is still true and valid knowledge[18].

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[17] Martland, pg.123-124

[18] For instance, Dewey's system would be hard pressed to justify labeling Hitler's Final Solution evil, or to claim that Hitler did not possess true knowledge. Dewey's system does not really provide an ethical or moral control on knowledge, even

Dewey tries to hedge his way around this problem by affirming the positive, as if assuming that the direction and flow of history is towards the more ethical, and that any case of an immoral regime is just a temporary aberration. All he's really doing though, is being an optimist, and as much as one might like him to be right, Dewey can offer no objective proof.

This does not make Dewey's system a total wash, however. For a strict empiricist, Dewey's system may be inadequate, but there is no denying that Dewey has made a few good points. There is something to be said for the way he views experience. After all, what's important in our world, and certainly in the scientific endeavor, is what use we make of the knowledge we have gained, the context in which we have understood it. For most scientific and engineering purposes, it matters little if the sphere is truly there, or merely refracted, or whatever, and for most everyday purposes, it certainly doesn't matter. Also, the wide variety of different perceptions that can be found among several witnesses to the same event testifies to how greatly the mind and experience of the observer can influence the formation of knowledge. Dewey was also right on when he stressed the importance of context in shaping thought. This is one of the basic principles of the social sciences, and while one might not agree with it, Dewey is certainly on

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really provide an ethical or moral control on knowledge, even though Dewey claimed that it did.

strengths and weaknesses, Kaplan's system will have its strengths and weaknesses. Like Dewey, Kaplan is an optimist, and Kaplan's God-concept and ethical theory will reflect this. No matter how much one would want it otherwise, no matter how good it sounds, what Kaplan says might just be wrong. On the other hand, just as there is in Dewey, there is much to learn in Kaplan, as Kaplan's system benefits from the strength of Dewey's as well.

Now that the discussion of the epistemology of Dewey is complete, the only thing that remains is to show how Kaplan has adopted this epistemology as his own. This is a fairly simple task, as a brief examination of selected citations from the writings of Kaplan will show without doubt that Dewey's system is in fact the source upon which Kaplan built his ideas for the reconstruction of Judaism. The reader should keep in mind that what follows is simply a representative selection, sufficient to prove the point at hand, for the possible examples that could be taken from Kaplan's writings are legion. In fact, Dewey's approach to knowledge and the way human beings function in society is implicit in almost everything that Kaplan writes, and to provide an exhaustive list of parallels is beyond the scope of this chapter.

The first concept to be examined will be Kaplan's understanding of process and how it relates to the Jewish

religion.[19] In The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, Kaplan has this to say

> The transition from traditional Judaism to the Judaism of the future can be effected only in the glaring light of complete awareness of the change involved...Such conviction is compatible only with the certainty that whatever ancient meanings or values we choose to conserve and develop are read out of, and not into, the traditional teachings or practices...*Revaluation consists in disengaging from the traditional content those elements in it which answer permanent postulates of human nature, and in integrating them into our own ideology*. When we revaluate, we analyze or break up the traditional values into their implications, and single out for acceptance those implications which can help us meet our own moral and spiritual needs; the rest may be relegated to archeology...One advantage we surely have over those who lived in the remote past...[is that] we are the heirs of all the experiences of the generations between them and ourselves...To revaluate a religious idea or institution of a past age, one must, first of all, understand it in the light of the total situation of which it was a part. One must enter imaginatively into the thought-world of its authors, and try to grasp what it meant to them in light of their experience and world-outlook. Then one should take into account the changes which have since taken place, and how they affect the validity of the idea or value of the institution under consideration. It may be that these changes have made the original idea or institution obsolete. But it is more likely that some modification of the original idea will suggest itself that might be related to the new situation and world-outlook in a way similar to that in which the original thought related itself to what was then the situation and world-outlook. As in mathematics any change in one term of an equation implies a corresponding change in the other, if the equation is to remain valid, so in interpreting any affirmation of relationship between two concepts any change in one implies a change

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[19] While I accept the thesis (as does Kaplan) that it is inaccurate to speak of one Jewish religion, for simplicity's sake I will refer to the Jewish religion in the singular. For the purposes of this thesis, using such a reference should cause no great misunderstandings to arise.

other.[20]

Similar statements appear in the anthology volume, Dynamic Judaism

> As the consciousness of a group, the main function of religion has ever been to enable the group so to adjust itself to its environment as to make the most of its life. In the course of this adjustment there developed spiritual values, ideas, and beliefs by means of which it was able to overcome all dangers and to utilize to the best advantage whatever opportunities of growth the environment offered it.[21]
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> A civilization is not a deliberate creation. It is as spontaneous a growth as any living organism. Once it exists it can be guided and directed, but its existence must be determined by the imperative of a national tradition and the will to live as a nation. Civilization arises not out of planned cooperation but out of centuries of inevitable living, working, and striving together.[22]
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> When we speak of the continuity of a religion, we do not mean that its teachings and prescribed modes of conduct have remained unchanged. This is the continuity of a stone, not of a living organism...To comprehend the continuity of a religion, it is necessary to think of the religion not as an abstract entity existing by itself, but as a function of a living people and as an aspect of

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[20] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.6-7. Note also Kaplan's optimism here. He takes it for granted that the moral and spiritual needs of the modern generation will be positive ones...a worthy thought, and hopefully true, but not guaranteed by his epitemological position. In his defense, however, Kaplan would probably argue that over the generations "good" ideas have won out over "bad" ideas, so that in broad areas, what is "good" and "bad" is known to all. Thus murder, since it has been looked down upon for generations, can safely be said to be "bad", and a position that holds murder to be bad can be defended. Kaplan never says there won't be mistakes - but he seems to feel that over the ages, sanity and good (as he understands them) will win out. Skeptics won't like it, but at least Kaplan has a refreshingly optimistic view of Judaism and of humanity.

[21] Dynamic Judaism, pg.44

[22] Ibid, pg.47

the civilization of that people.[23]

> ...these customs, laws, standards, and conventions originated, at the time of their origin, in response to the needs of that society...when the traditional culture pattern does not contribute to the welfare of the society and to its component individuals, the mind must be free to alter and reconstruct the traditional culture pattern, to seek the development of new and better social habits to meet the changed situation.[24]

It is clear from the above that Kaplan has the same view of how process effects human knowledge as Dewey does. Human knowledge is not a never changing, static entity. Rather, it is a set of ideas and beliefs that arise out of the relationship between the experiencer and the experienced. Human culture contains contexts, and these contexts shape what is experienced and believed by the person. When contexts of understandings change, then "knowledge" must change also, so that for Kaplan the feedback loop described by Dewey above clearly takes place. It is also clear that many of these examples could be used to illustrate other aspects of Dewey's thought (context, or how knowledge comes from a unified whole) as well. The inescapable conclusion is that Kaplan relied on Dewey for many of his ideas.

Perhaps if that were all that could be shown, one might argue that there is indeed a similarity but by no means is any kind of reliance proven. All one has to do, however, is to

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[23] Ibid, pg.136

[24] Ibid, pg.178. This is, incidentally, almost word for word from one of Dewey's essays. Again, note Kaplan's (and Dewey's) optimism here.

look at what Kaplan thinks on the issue of context and its importance to any understanding of the religious enterprise and to a reconstruction of Judaism. Once again, Kaplan's thoughts are almost verbatim from Dewey. In The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion Kaplan states that

> The very attempt to abstract Jewish religion from all the other aspects of Jewish life shows a woeful misunderstanding of the vital and organic relationship between religion and the other elements of a civilization. *The civilization of the Jewish people, with its long history and idealized future, has hitherto been the matrix of the ideas and practices by means of which the Jew expressed his relationship to God.* All the components of that civilization, namely language, literature, social norms, folkways and the arts, have always entered into every texture of the Jewish religion. We can no more think of that religion apart from any of them than we can think of the soul or personality of any human being without reference to his appearance, voice, acts, and words.[25]

Similarly, in Dynamic Judaism he states that

> ...the experience about the world and ourselves is determined by the society and civilization into which we are born...[26]

> To possess inner freedom, the human mind must be able to rouse itself...to challenge or question the inherent value of any purpose, ideal, belief, or standard which we are asked to accept merely because it has back of it the prestige of a long tradition or the weight of numbers. This does not mean that man can make himself independent of tradition, or need not reckon with the opinion of his fellows. Man is a social being. His progress depends on his being able to utilize the accumulated culture to which innumerable individuals in all the past generations have contributed and to avail himself of the experience of his contemporaries, particularly of those whose opinions may be more valid than his own, because of better access to the facts on

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[25] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.17

[26] Dynamic Judaism, pg.73

which they are based.[27]

> From the psychological point of view, organized religions are integral to particular civilizations and cannot be understood apart from them. They always express the collective personality of a particular society. They are as nontransferable and incommunicable as is individual personality. What they mean to their own members and what they mean to others can never be the same...[28]

> All the arts, all the cultural media by which men communicate ideas and emotions, depend on symbols.[29]

Again, the connection between these statements and the ideas of John Dewey are self-evident. Context shapes thought, and nothing can be understood outside of the cultural context it is embedded in - in fact, without a cultural context, its hard to even begin to make sense, whether you are talking about Judaism, science or art. Its fairly obvious that once again Kaplan owes a strong debt to Dewey's philosophy and here Kaplan draws on one of Dewey's great strengths. It certainly makes good sense[30] that culture is important to thought, so when Kaplan says that it makes little sense to talk about Jewish survival if there isn't some form of Jewish life to go

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[27] Ibid, pg.177

[28] Ibid, pg.196-197

[29] Ibid, pg.218

[30] To me at least. I have a B.A. in anthropology, and the one thing that is evident from any social science training whatever is that culture and context have a great deal to do with thought. For people to live a certain way of life, that way of life has to be coherent with their view of the world and capable of meeting their needs. If the way of life is unable to do this, it collapses, often leaving confused people in its wake. In addition to modern Jews, just look at almost any native culture that has been exposed to modern culture - most, if not all, have collapsed.

around it, he is right on. Kaplan thus has a good basis for arguing why his reconstructionist approach is critical for the survival of Judaism.[31]

The one last area that will make undeniable the connection between Kaplan and Dewey has to do with Kaplan's approach to the form Judaism will take in the future and the criteria that will be used to determine whether or not his Reconstructionist approach works. Again, the influence of Dewey's process pragmatic philosophy cannot be missed. In Judaism as a Civilization Kaplan writes

> The individuality of the Jewish religion cannot be described in advance. Only after a Jewish life or civilization is attained will there emerge a type of religion as unique as that which emerged from the Jewish civilization of the past.[32]

He then goes on to quote Dewey himself on the subject of how individuality grows out of and forms itself by and through the very process of creation! Finally, in Judaism Without Supernaturalism, Kaplan provides the criteria for determining the success or failure of Reconstructionism. He says

> The Reconstructionist movement is a method rather than a program. As a method, its validity should not be tested by its organizational success. Its function is not to form an additional sect or denomination. What will prove whether Reconstructionism is valid is the extent to which it will succeed in preventing the existing sects or denominations from doing the harm they

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[31] Of course, one must already agree with Kaplan's assumption (to him, a self-evident truth), that Judaism has a right and a reason to survive. For Kaplan, the existence of Judaism is itself justification for its existence. Civilizations have a right to exist, simply because they are.

[32] Judaism as a Civilization, pg.385

> do at present to Jewish life, and in eliciting and reenforcing the good they are capable of doing.[33]

Clearly this is Dewey's empirical test, where the only way to know whether or not something works is to look at its results; to use Dewey's terminology, the consequences that flow from it.[34]

It is clear from the above that the epistemology of Kaplan has to be that of John Dewey. Kaplan possesses the same view of reality that Dewey does, he uses the same terminology, and approaches problems in exactly the same way. Such a similarity can only exist if Kaplan does indeed share basic philosophical concepts in common with Dewey, and what concept can be more basic than the foundation one uses for one's knowledge? Kaplan's epistemology can thus be summed up as follows: Kaplan, like Dewey, is a pragmatic empiricist, one who believes that knowledge only arises out of reflection upon the consequences of the dynamic interactions between the many things that make up this world. Everything is a part of reality, but understandings can vary, and in the case of Kaplan, the understandings that he wants to create are those that will allow Judaism to survive and thrive as a meaningful religious culture in the modern age, a religious culture that

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[33] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.209. Again, note Kaplan's optimism.

[34] This, of course, falls into the same Machiavellian pitfall described earlier for Dewey. Kaplan offers no guarantees, but seems to take it as an article of faith that Reconstructionism will develop in a positive way (positive in the sense of the usual understanding of the word).

is based on modern thought and modern conceptual understandings. Any conception of Judaism not based on modern thought and concepts is doomed to failure, as it cannot speak to people who live in the modern age, and it cannot meet the pragmatic test of being "useful" or "true" to any modern Jew. The only way to save Judaism, as far as Kaplan is concerned, is to modernize it[35], and the first step in modernizing it is to get rid of any supernatural elements that adhere in it.

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[35] That is, bring it in line with modern thought and with modern conceptions.

Chapter 3: Kaplan's Concept of God

In keeping with his epistemology, Kaplan begins the exposition of his concept of God by stating that the traditional concept of God[1] is no longer tenable to the modern mind and that a new concept of God must take into account the evolutionary changes that have occurred in the world view of humanity. As he says "The segment of the Jewish people which still subscribes to the supernaturalist version of its history is rapidly diminishing"[2] and that 'At the present time, the creeds, ritual and ceremonies of the various historic religions are not vitally significant even to the majority who observe them."[3] This fact should surprise no one, he says, for the modern mind is very different from the ancient and medieval mind. He points out three tendencies that make this so, tendencies that demand a new understanding of God. In order, they are:

1) The tendency to adopt the scientific approach as the most reliable method of ascertaining the truth

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[1] Kaplan is aware that Judaism has changed through time and that there is more than one Judaism with more than one God concept. However, he uses the term traditional concept of God to refer to the concept of God as a supernatural person outside the universe; who created that universe, and all that there is; who exercises providence over that universe; who has revealed His will and demands fealty and obedience in return for long life, blessing, protection, and (in later Judaisms) an afterlife in paradise. (see Judaism as a Civilization, pg.39).

[2] If Not Now, When?, pg.31

[3] Judaism as a Civilization, pg.200

concerning all matters of human interest. 2) The tendency to set up human welfare in a socialized sense as the criterion of the good. 3) The tendency to regard esthetic experience and creativity as essential to the life of the spirit (i.e. freedom and self expression are valued, as opposed to authoritarian rule).[4]

These tendencies simply make it impossible for the vast majority of modern people generally, and the Jews specifically, to accept the traditional understanding of God. As he says

> With all the revolutionary changes in man's outer and inner life, the traditional cosmic orientation could not but grow obsolete, despite the fact that it took a long time for the Copernican revolution to penetrate the mind of the average person...once started on its way, this conception was bound to to destroy the traditional world outlook which was based on the biblical account of the creation of the world and of man.[5]

> The chief opposition to the traditional conception of God in that sense arises not from the scientific approach to the study of nature in general, or even man in general. It arises from the objective study of history. The natural sciences like physics and chemistry cannot disprove the possibility of miracles, though they may assert their improbability. But the objective study of history has established the fact that the records of miracles are unreliable, and that the stories about them are merely the product of the popular imagination. The traditional concept of God is challenged by history, anthropology and psychology; these prove that beliefs similar to those found in the Bible about God arise among all peoples at a certain stage of mental and social development, and pass through a process of evolution which is entirely conditioned by the development of the other elements in their civilization.[6]

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[4] Judaism as a Civilization, pp.36-37

[5] Dynamic Judaism, pg.35

[6] Judaism as a Civilization, pg.39

> Modern science has again reconstructed our picture of the universe and destroyed the dichotomy of body and soul, matter and spirit, physical and metaphysical, which characterized the Middle ages. We cannot conceive of God any more as a sort of invisible superman, displaying the same psychological traits as man, but on a greater scale. We cannot think of him as loving, pitying, rewarding, punishing, etc. Many have therefore abandoned altogether the conception of a personal God, and prefer to think of ultimate reality in terms of force, energy and similar concepts.[7]

Thus, he argues, because of these fundamental changes in the way people think about the world, the only way to save religion (and, by extension, the concept of God) is to bring it in line with modern understandings so that a religious outlook on life no longer requires a basic contradiction with how the world is viewed. Since the modern world view is based on naturalism, naturalism is also the only possible basis for religion and for a concept of God. As he says

> *For a religion to function healthily and creatively, all of its three dimensions have to be an integral part of the prevailing climate of ideas.* It has to be in the same universe of discourse as the general culture by which people live. That was the case until modern times. In the past, supernaturalism dominated all human culture. The concomitant of supernaturalism in culture was authoritarian discipline with its other-worldly outlook on life. The emphasis in all supernaturalist thinking about the condition of man was on the limitations of his life. Nowadays, however, human culture is dominated by naturalism. The concomitant of naturalism in culture is freedom, with its humane and this-worldly spirit. The emphasis in all naturalist thinking about the condition of man is on the possibilities rather than the limitations of his life.[8]

By naturalism, Kaplan has a specific concept in mind, a

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[7] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.88

[8] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.5

concept that holds that all that happens in the universe happens because of specific natural laws, and not because of the will of any given being. As he says

> The "natural" is more than a synonym for the regular and the usual. Natural has a specific meaning which is intended to correct one of the basic assumptions of the unphilosophic mind. It denotes the fact that the action of each thing is conditioned by the law of its own being. That law cannot be altered by any will acting from without.[9]

However, Kaplan is quick to point out that a pure mechanistic naturalism is neither desirable nor usable as a basis for religion. All too often, he argues, "For most people who are...influenced by the spirit of modernism there seems to be no alternative but an unqualified secularism."[10] Not only is this too bad, but it is also wrong. For there is, according to Kaplan, a type of naturalism in which religion and God can still play a significant role. According to him

> There is a naturalistic philosophy of life with which religion or spirituality of any kind is incompatible. That is the philosophy which reduces all manifestations of life, including thought, to mere operations of matter and physio-chemical causes. In such a philosophy, there is no room for belief in spiritual values as having any inherent reality. But there is a type of naturalism which recognizes qualitative distinctions between lower and higher orders of being. That type of naturalism allows for creative or emergent evolution, and for the autonomous functioning of mind and spirit. For that kind of philosophy, the data of rational and spiritual experience are not merely by-products of sense experience. Truth, justice, love are conceived as operating in their own right and helping to bring order out of chaos. Hence there is no reason for dismissing the experience of selfhood or personality as

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[9] Judaism as a Civilization, pg.314

[10] Judaism without Supernaturalism, pg.24

> illusion. By the same token, we must accept as genuine the experience of Godhood, which is to the environment or cosmos what selfhood or personality is to the body. To these two spiritual qualities we must add "society", which occupies a position intermediate between them and shares something of the nature of each. Though all these three are data of natural experience, they transcend the brief life of the individual human being, and redeem it of its merely temporary character, in that they enable him to lay up resources and create potentialities that outlast him.[11]

Religion has a vital role to play, even in a naturalistic universe, for

> The modern-minded person must be made to realize that the purely naturalistic approach to reality is true as far as it goes, but does not go far enough. From the standpoint of salvation, or making the most of human life, the strictly scientific account of reality can help us only *in providing the conditions* necessary to our achieving that goal. But the very notion of salvation, in any sense whatever, is entirely beyond its scope. It cannot even justify our striving for that goal, much less assure that it is attainable. All values or ideals, though they do not deny natural law as understood by scientists, do point to a phase of reality, of which natural law does not take account.[12]

Thus, for Kaplan, the concerns of science and the concerns of religion are entirely separate, and there should be no conflict between them. Religion deals with "...the problems concerning human needs."[13] Thus

> The so-called conflict between religion and science is actually a conflict only between religion, conceived as theurgy, and science, conceived as a method based upon experience and experiment. There can be no quarrel between religion as a source of values and meanings, and

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[11] Dynamic Judaism, pg.69. Note also the similarity to Dewey's understanding of the reality of experience.

[12] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.111

[13] If Not Now, When?, pg.38

science, as a description of objective reality.[14]

Because Kaplan feels that there is more to the universe and to experience than just natural law, he calls his position transnaturalism rather than naturalism. As he defines it

> Transnaturalism is that extension of naturalism which takes into account much that mechanistic or materialistic or positivist science is incapable of dealing with. Transnaturalism reaches out into the domain where mind, personality, purpose, ideals, values and meanings dwell. It treats of the good and the true. Whether or not it has a distinct logic of its own is problematic. But it certainly has a language of its own, the language of simile, metaphor and poetry. That is the language of symbol, myth and drama. In that universe of discourse, belief in God spells trust in life and in man, as capable of transcending the potentialities for evil that inhere in his animal heredity, in his social heritage, and in the conditions of his environment. Transnaturalist religion beholds God in the fulfillment of human nature and not in the suspension of the natural order. Its function is not to help man overcome the hazards of nature, but to enable him to bring under control his inhumanity to his fellow-man.[15]

Thus, although we live in a natural universe and the findings of science must be accepted, science does not deal with all that there is, especially on the human level, and religion must exist to fill in the gaps.

Having established the transnaturalist position, Kaplan then goes on to specify his concept of God, a concept that flows naturally from the position he takes. As he puts it "My concept of God is entirely derived from social psychology."[16]

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[14] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pp.48-49

[15] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.10

[16] If Not Now, When?, pg.113

Building on the work of Durkheim[17], Kaplan argues that

> ...religion is fundamentally the functioning of the collective consciousness, and that the development of the individual mind has its roots in the functioning of the collective consciousness. The collective consciousness as such is the result of some rallying totem, any object on the earth beneath or in the heavens above which renders human beings aware of their being in need of one another. In the course of that collective procedure which we identify as religion, there emerge certain ideas, principles, concerning reality - their own reality, the realities of human nature, and the realities of their own environment.[18]

Since the nature of religion is functional, the only possible understanding of God that will be intelligible to the modern mind is also a functional one. Kaplan argues that the God idea in Judaism has always been functional and historical[19], but that at some point in the past the God idea became an end in itself rather than a means to an end. As he says

> The analogical reasoning, the mystical interpretation of its social experiences in terms of God, represent the healthy working of the group mind. But when analogical reasoning was transferred to the field of purely logical concepts and formulated into a theological system, religion developed an "incidental excess of function" which in time was mistaken as the chief purpose of religion. Thus arose the fatal aberration that religion was a sort of schoolmistress to instruct humanity in all things in the heaven above and on the earth beneath. Her curriculum included metaphysics, physics, history, politics, economics, and kindred subjects. Anyone who ventured to explore reality on his

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[17] Emile Durkheim was an sociologist who devoted his life to studying religion in its psychosocial context. His most famous work, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, is entirely devoted to religious sociology.

[18] If Not Now, When?, pg.57. Note again the emphasis taken from Dewey on context as structuring thought.

[19] See Dynamic Judaism, pg.73 and The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.17-19

> own initiative compromised the dignity of religion. And if he went so far as to assert any fact that contradicted tradition he was adjudged a heretic who deserved chastisement. All this has changed. The scientific spirit has invaded the entire domain of human thinking. Even theology is giving way to the science of religion to which it bears the same relation as alchemy to chemistry. Religion will be restored to its rights. It will once again react naturally to the supernatural (here with the meaning of transnatural) and will find truer and more apt analogies to answer to the deepening of the sense of mystery.[20]

So, in order to restore religion and God to their proper places in human life, the concept of God must be reformulated so that it focuses on the functional aspects of the God idea rather than on speculations about a supernatural being. Kaplan is clear on this when he writes that

> ...the term "God" is not a substantive noun and therefore does not necessarily refer to a being but to a function, the function which manifests itself in the fulfillment of man's spiritual potential[21]...*It is the business of religion not to give a metaphysical conception of God, but to make clear what we mean by the belief in God, from the standpoint of the difference that belief makes in human conduct and striving.*[22]

Kaplan is quick to reinforce this point and to caution against anyone assuming that he has a specific being in mind when he uses the term God. As he says

> In our thinking about God we must avoid all those mental habits which issue in logical fallacies. The most common of these is hypostasis, or assuming the separate identifiable existence of anything for which language has a name. There is considerable difference, for example, between the way a scientist thinks of gravity and the way most laymen think about it. A scientist regards it as a

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[20] Dynamic Judaism, pg.44

[21] If Not Now, When?, pg.59

[22] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.26

property or quality of matter...The average layman...thinks of it as...an invisible something that acts upon masses of matter pulling them together. According to both conceptions, gravity is real...but the layman finds it difficult to regard gravity as real without at the same time thinking of it as a thing, an object, a self-existent being or entity.[23]

Based on the above, Kaplan then goes on to offer his definition of God. God is

> ...objectively speaking, "process". The process is that which in human nature is experienced as transcendence. Transcendence is the part of nature known as organicity. Organicity is the fact that any entity is more than the sum of its parts with each part sharing in that incremental plus. The traditional term for transcendence is "holiness"...The process of organicity, functioning *self-consciously* in human organic societies, is God, as the power that makes for salvation. That power is none other than holiness, or transcendence, which is not merely an idea. It is a process. Gravitation, to draw an analogy from nature, is a process that makes for power, whereas holiness is a process that makes for spirit...God as process belongs neither to supernaturalism nor to naturalism, but to transnaturalism.[24]

Kaplan amplifies on this theme when he says

> When we say that God is Process, we select, out of the infinite processes in the universe, that complex of forces and relationships which makes for the highest fulfillment of man as a human being and identify it by the term "God". In exactly the same way, we select, among all the forces and relationships that enter into the life of the individual, those which make for his highest fulfillment and identify them by the term "person". God and person are thus correlative terms, the meaning of each being relative to and dependent on that of the other, like parent and child, teacher and pupil, citizen and state. God is the process by which the universe produces persons, and persons are the processes by which God is manifest in the individual. Neither term has meaning without the other. So to conceive of God is to regard Him as personal, in the sense that He manifests

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[23] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.21

[24] If Not Now, When?, pp.37-38

> himself in our personality, in every effort of ours to live up to our responsibilities as human beings. At the same time, he is not a person, since He cannot be compared with a human person, any more than the human person can be compared with one of his momentary acts.[25]

Several conclusions are evident from Kaplan's formulation of the God idea. In the first place, in absolutely no way is God to be understood as a being who possesses individual existence. God is a process of forces in the universe, especially as they are revealed in the interactions of human beings in society. Although Kaplan does not explicitly state it, the implication is clear that if there were no human beings it would make little or no sense to talk about God. God only exists as a complex of ideals in human society, ideals that represent humanity's highest aspirations and goals. For Kaplan, this is not legerdemain, as he believes (based on Dewey) that ideas are real entities that can have real power. Thus, if humans have a complex of ideals that they term God, God really does exist, insofar as it represents a goal to strive for and an ideal to achieve. Humans may never achieve the ideal, but to Kaplan's way of thinking (again drawing on Dewey), without the ideal there is absolutely no hope of progress. Secondly, without God there is no hope for human salvation, salvation being used here to refer to soteria, or ultimate meaningful existence. The whole purpose of the God idea is to make life meaningful, to allow people to experience the sense of transcendence that comes

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[25] Dynamic Judaism, pg.216

from being an integrated part of the group (provided that the group allows the individual to achieve self-realization[26] - in fact, that sense of transcendence is exactly what we mean by the term God). Thirdly, God is identifiable with but not limited to the natural processes in the universe. Since God is the process by which the universe produces persons, those natural forces that allow humans (along with stars, planets, animals etc...) to exist are part of God, but are not His totality. That is why Kaplan refers to his position as transnaturalism. Nature is part of God, but so are human ideals such as goodness, truth, honesty, empathy, loyalty, justice, freedom, love, and transcendence - ideals that cannot be explained by science alone. And finally, God could not have worked miracles or commanded any specific rites and dogmas, topics that will be taken up in later chapters.

As should be obvious, this is a far cry from any traditional concept of God and calls for nothing less than a radical redefinition of religion. God, in the traditional Jewish conception, is a person; a person who has created the universe and therefore can command obedience from the creatures in it; a person who has made a special, eternal covenant with the Jewish people; a person who represents all that is ethical, yes, but who is also a protector, a provider, and a redeemer. By removing the supernatural element from

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[26] Self-realization is used here in the modern psychological sense and will be taken up in great detail in the chapter on soteria.

Judaism, Kaplan has radically transformed the Jewish religion. His claim that his brand of Judaism is the natural outgrowth of Orthodoxy is only true in the widest evolutionary sense; in the sense that a man is the natural outgrowth of an amoeba. Technically, it is true, but in any ordinary sense it certainly is not. What Kaplan has done is to radically redefine God and religion for the modern era (remember, his whole thesis is that supernatural conceptions are no longer convincing in the modern world). Some have accused Kaplan of trying to hide this - but it seems from his statements on God that this not the case. Kaplan knew what he was doing, and probably, given his pragmatic perspective, truly believed that his brand of Judaism was the logical outgrowth of Orthodoxy, but there is no denying the fact that what Kaplan presents is radically different from any Orthodoxy.

Some have also accused Kaplan of "cheating" on his God-concept - after all, when he discusses the function of the God-idea in history he focuses on the morals and ethics associated with and from God, and entirely ignores God's role as protector and insurer of order in the universe and thus he leaves out key parts of God's traditional function. By misrepresenting God, they say, Kaplan can make his concept appear Jewish.

This criticism is true as far as it goes, but I think Kaplan would respond that the evolutionary perspective demands that in a new age a new concept is needed. From such a

perspective, the old, traditional God-concept has been outgrown, and the idea of God as protector or insurer of order in the universe is simply not credible to the modern mind. The only remaining viable function of the God-idea is the moral/ethical one, so that aspect of the God-idea is the one that has to be adapted. Thus we have God as the power that makes for human fulfillment, as the power that insures moral behavior.

Those who think Kaplan is "cheating" on his representation the God-idea also point to the fact that Kaplan's understanding of the role of the God-idea is radically different from the way traditional Jewish thought and texts understand the role of the God-idea. In the traditional world-view, the role of God has little to do with spirit, values, or human transcendence. God is instead the creator, protector and commander, and what concerns God concerns God, and what concerns man concerns man. A traditional view of God, these critics argue, serves a completely different role than the one Kaplan says it does.

From the above perspective, Kaplan <u>has</u> certainly misrepresented the God-idea. But its important to remember that this is not Kaplan's perspective. Kaplan's perspective is one that includes the findings of the social sciences. These sciences hypothesize that concepts of god(s) possessed by given cultures can be understood as representing the hopes, fears and dreams of those cultures, in symbolic form. From

this perspective, it makes sense for Kaplan to speak of the God-idea in Judaism as functioning in the way he describes. Kaplan's claim would simply be that throughout Jewish history the God-idea did in fact serve in the way he has described, but that the Jews themselves were not consciously aware of it and therefore did not talk about God in this fashion. Initially, the God-idea might also have included hopes about protection and order, but as these aspects of the God-idea are not relevant to a modern understanding of God, they can be safely forgotten. The relevant part of the God-idea for today, the idea of God as the sum total of all that we hold sacred about humanity, is what matters, and therefore, Kaplan would say, that is the part I shall emphasize in my conception of God. This psychosocial perspective on the God-idea is solidly grounded in the work of Durkheim and many other social scientists, and Kaplan can justify taking it. After all, if there is no supernatural God (a sure fact, as far as Kaplan is concerned) then all those people throughout the ages must have been doing <u>something</u> with their various versions of the God-idea, and the insights of social science can explain what. Given this approach, Kaplan is justified in presenting such a different view of the function of the God-idea than a traditional Jew or Jewish text would, because Kaplan can view it as simply uncovering what was a previously hidden truth. One can, of course, reject the findings of Durkheim and other

social scientists[27], but given their influence, it can be seen that Kaplan can argue convincingly that his God-concept is based on solid ground.

In his other writings, Kaplan amplifies on his definition of God. Here is a brief list of some of those amplifications

> To believe in God is to reckon with life's creative forces, tendencies and potentialities as forming an organic unity, and as giving meaning to life by virtue of that unity...Our intuition of God is the absolute negation and antithesis of all evaluations of human life which assume that consciousness is a disease, civilization a transient sickness, and all our efforts to lift ourselves above the brute only a vain pretense.[28]

> ...God can only mean one thing: namely, the totality of all those forces in life that render human life worthwhile. The term worthwhile, in modern parlance, is the equivalent of the more traditional term, holy.[29]

> The upshot of all that men have tried to express when they affirmed the existence of God, is that the world has meaning, for *God is what the world means to the man who believes in the possibility of maximum life and strives for it.*[30]

> It is sufficient that God should mean to us the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos. This is what we understand by God as the creative life of the universe.[31]

> The purpose of speaking of God as "the Power that makes for salvation" is to identify the particular human experiences which enable us to feel the impact of that

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[27] This is really a topic for another thesis entirely. Obviously though, if one rejects Durkheim one will certainly reject Kaplan.

[28] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.26-27

[29] Ibid, pg.133

[30] Ibid, pg.328

[31] Ibid, pg.76

process in the environment and in ourselves which impels us to grow and improve physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually. That process is *Godhood*. It reveals itself in those particular experiences. That is the meaning which the traditional statement that God reveals Himself should convey to us. For the sake of that cultural continuity which is itself a manifestation of Godhood, we should continue to speak of God as "revealing Himself".[32]

God, not merely as a metaphysical being, but as the object of worship and prayer, is the power that makes for salvation of man through the community which organizes its entire social order around the purpose of man's salvation. In the symbolic significance of a ritual practice, God should be conceived as the source of all moral and spiritual values. That makes an important difference in the way those values are regarded. Detached from their source in God, and from their function as means to salvation of man, all moral and spiritual values are apt to be, in the final analysis, the expression of the will of the ruling classes and their servitors. Related, however, to God as the Power that makes for man's salvation, they constitute groping attempts of human nature to approximate those ways of human living which are certain to perpetuate the human race and to help it fulfill its highest potentialities.[33]

This God, YHWH, is that aspect of the Jewish people which renders it more than the sum of its individuals, past present, and future, and gives meaning to all virtues, sins, successes, and failures.[34]

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[32] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.110

[33] Ibid, pg.52

[34] If Not Now,When?, pg.68

> This is the process by which men have achieved whatever desired ends they have set up for themselves. All ideals rest on the assumption that there exists in reality that which, if we can discover it, assures their realization. In some instances, our assumption may prove incorrect. If so, our ideal must be abandoned as illusory and invalid. But we can never abandon all ideals, since it is part of our nature to have purposes in life. The formulation of ideals is an indispensable part of the process by which our long-range purposes are realized. Therefore, on the ethical level of idealistic evaluation, no less than on the impulsive and the authoritative level, we feel the need of reckoning with what has always been the implication of the God idea, that whatever ought to be can be, and ultimately will be, realized...The events of life create new problems, new wants, new ideals in an eternal process. The goal of the ideal is ever a flying goal, but the process of expectation and achievement goes on, and God is the name we give to the reality that underlies this process. Our God is the Eternal; belief in Him is a necessary concomitant of all idealistic endeavor.[35]

God is, therefore, the name we give to those impulses within us that cause us to strive for the common good, that cause us to believe that existence has meaning and that cause us to believe that the common good can be achieved.

In order to fully understand Kaplan's idea of God, it is important to remember that he does not approach the question of God's existence in the same way that philosophers generally approach the question. Kaplan's orientation is psychosocial, not philosophical, so he is not attempting to assess the evidence and then arrive at a coherent definition of God. It is not at all important to him to establish God as the ground of being. Rather, he begins with the empirical

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[35] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.325. Note also, once again, the similarity to Dewey's process philosophy.

fact that all societies have some concept of God or gods and seeks to explain what function that concept had for the societies in question. God is real, he argues, because all people at all times have had the experience of transcendence and idealism to which he refers. The awareness of God, as Kaplan defines Him, is common to all humanity, and is in no way contradictory to a scientific, modern world view. As he says

> There has, unfortunately, arisen a science of religion which has proved to be a snare and a delusion. It is the kind of approach which, by trespassing upon fields of inquiry beyond its scope, presumes to explain away the reality of God. That however should not prejudice us against the science of religion, which, by keeping strictly within its limitations, confines itself to the task of explaining how the God-idea has functioned in history. Such science is as indispensable to a proper understanding of religion as mathematics is to astronomy. The religion which it enables us to understand is not that of the metaphysician whose problem is the reality of God, but of the group, and of the individual in the group whose concern is with what God means to man and expects of him. The problem of the metaphysician is prior to science; the concern of the religious group or individual can best be understood in the light of science.[36]

Kaplan is aware, of course, that he is vulnerable to the accusation that he is advocating belief in a fiction merely because it has useful consequences. Needless to say, Kaplan does not feel this is so. To begin with, he argues, the God-idea is real, not an illusion, no matter what some psychologists might think.[37] And, because he shares Dewey's

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[36] Judaism as a Civilization, pg.308

[37] Ibid, pg.309

conviction that an idea is real and that it can have pragmatic consequences, he feels that it is absurd to say that God is merely a fiction because He is identified with the sum total of human ideals. As he says

> This should not be interpreted as implying that the belief in God is purely subjective, a figment of the imagination rather than an interpretation of reality. One might as well say that, since the awareness of color is a subjective experience, it is entirely a creation of the eye, and that no objective reality is responsible for the eye experiencing color, as to say that, since our idea of God is determined wholly by our own limited experience of life's values, there is no objective reality which is responsible for the values which we experience. *The word "God" has thus come to be symbolically expressive of the highest ideals for which men strive and, at the same time, points to the objective fact that the world is so constituted as to make for the realization of those ideals.*[38]

Furthermore, he argues, the fact that God is not a being in no way detracts from God's reality. He writes

> The divine is no less real, no less dependable for our personal salvation or self-realization, if we think of it as a quality than if we think of it as an entity or a being. Human personality may serve as an illustration. It is no less real, if we think of it in psychological terms, as a system of behavior patterns in which the human organism reacts to the world, than if we think of it as a sort of invisible spiritual man that inhabits the visible physical man and determines his behavior.[39]

And finally

> Some people imagine that the religious experience of God is invalidated by the fact that it is demonstrably a psychological effect of the presence of the multitude. This is like saying that our emotional response to the music produced by a violin is not a real experience of music, because it is after all but the effect of the scraping of horse-hair on catgut. The implication of

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[38] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.306

[39] Ibid, pg.25

> such disparagement is that our awareness of God in worship is really only an awareness of the worshipping crowd. But this is a falsehood analogous to our identifying our awareness of the music with our awareness of the instrument, whereas we know that it is possible for us to enjoy music while quite unmindful of the instrument that produces it.[40]

While these examples may not stand up to intense philosophical scrutiny, they are perfectly consistent with Kaplan's approach to reality. The experiences are real, no matter what causes them, and the important issue to figure out is not whether or not they are based on objective reality, but rather what they mean to the people who experience them. Since they are understood as experiences of God, and since pragmatic consequences flow from that understanding, the divine is in fact real and can be experienced.

One might also object that Kaplan provides no explanation of the ground of being. This is true - Kaplan doesn't. In Kaplan's view, though, this is not a weakness. Kaplan is not at all interested in the nature of physical reality. Physical reality simply "is", and science is the means by which humans understand and explain it. In the scientific world-view a metaphysical ground of being simply isn't necessary (as far as Kaplan is concerned). What is necessary, however, is a way to understand and experience what science cannot understand, the transnatural. Understanding and creating the transnatural experience is the one true purpose of religion. In order for religion to succeed at that purpose, it requires a

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[40] Ibid, pp.249-250

psychosocial, functional concept of God. A ground of being is irrelevant, a ground of the transnatural is not. So it is true that Kaplan does not provide for a ground of being in his philosophy, but this is largely because he considers the issue to be an irrelevant one.

Thus concludes the discussion of Kaplan's concept of God. It is a naturalistic concept (or, more accurately, a transnatural one) in which God is not a being and therefore has nothing to do with running the universe. God is a power, a set of ideals, a complex of relationships, that is made manifest in the relations between people living in social groups. God is no less real for His merely being a quality, and God can have real power in making a difference in people's lives. As Kaplan concludes

> When men break through their narrow and prejudiced conception of religion and begin to realize that it is inevitable for the concept of God to reflect one's mental and ethical development, they will learn to identify as divine that Power in the world which impels them to make it what it should be. The name of God will then stand for a truth about reality, not in terms of a division between natural and supernatural, but in terms of normal human experience. That truth is that life has meaning and as such deserves that we give to it, whether despite or because of the evil that mars it, the best that is in us. Men's hearts will then be filled with that exuberance and gratitude which the Psalmist felt when he called upon his soul to greet and praise the Lord...They will determine, with the Psalmist, to make their lives a hymn to God...Theirs will be the faith which even death cannot extinguish, for despite death they will triumphantly proclaim: "Magnified and sanctified be His great name in the world which He hath created according to His will."[41]

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[41] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.329

Chapter 4: The Epistemology of Spinoza

Spinoza's epistemological system, on the other hand, is greatly different from Kaplan's. Like Kaplan, Spinoza is a naturalist, and holds that all phenomena have a natural explanation. Unlike Kaplan, Spinoza is a strict rationalist, and holds that all that needs to be known can be discovered and deduced in and by the human mind. This rationalist approach characterizes Spinoza's approach to all the areas of his system, for Spinoza is amazingly consistent. Every area of his system interlocks with every other area like well meshing gears. From his few epistemological principles, Spinoza is able to deduce his views on God, religion, and the soterial life.

Spinoza, although he disagreed with many of Descartes' conclusions, was greatly impressed by his method, and used it as the basis of his philosophical system. Spinoza greatly desired certainty, and believed, along with Descartes, that mathematical demonstration held the key to an objective, certain understanding of the nature of reality.[1] Spinoza held that the human mind, beginning with a series of self-evident propositions and axioms whose truth could not be denied, could unravel all the secrets that reality had to offer purely by working through a logical process of deduction. He believed,

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[1] Jones, pg.193

as Meyer says,

> ...that all these things, and even many things more subtle and sublime, could not only be clearly and distinctly conceived by us, but even readily explained if only the human mind were led in the way which Descartes opened up and made possible for investigating truth and acquiring knowledge.[2]

Thus, Allison says,

> Spinoza affirms an absolute rationalism. Given the proper method, reality as a whole is intelligible to the human mind, and Spinoza claims in his Ethics to have done nothing less than to demonstrate this truth.[3]

The method Spinoza uses to demonstrate these truths is really a very simple one in concept, although difficult in application - the method of geometrical demonstration. This was the method that Descartes pioneered, and what Spinoza did was simply to draw out Descartes' system to its logical conclusions, something that he felt Descartes failed to do.[4] The method itself is a simple one. As Jones explains,

> If geometry is the model science, reality must consist in entities connected by the kind of relation cognized in geometry. This is the relation of implication - for instance, being a triangle involves having three sides. It follows that reality must consist in a set of entities every one of which is implicatorily related to various other entities. As a consequence, the mind moves from some entity A to some other entity B, which is implied by A. When the mind is in the presence of these two entities, A and B, it infallibly sees that A implies B. It then moves on to C, implied by B, and so on. The whole problem is to arrange our thinking about these entities in such a way that our minds traverse these relations in due order, that is, that we move from

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[2] Allison, pg. 45

[3] Allison, pg.45

[4] Jones, pg.194

A to C, via B.[5]

Jones, however, has not done full justice to the problem. The whole problem is not merely to arrange our thinking in such and such a way. While his explanation of the thinking behind the geometric method is correct, he fails to point out that the whole structure only functions if one has begun with the correct entities - begin with false premises, and of course the structure will lead to false conclusions.[6] Spinoza, of course, was well aware of this problem, and sought a way to show that, in point of fact, his premises were valid, and therefore so were his conclusions. He did this in two ways: by demonstrating that there is a knowable difference between imagination and sure knowledge, and by establishing God as the ground of being, as the first premise from which all other premises flow. As Allison says,

> ...[Spinoza's] rationalism involves the belief in the total intelligibility of the real. Given Spinoza's mathematically oriented conception of knowledge, this in turn means that all reality can be explained within a single deductive system. This is not, of course, to claim that particular facts can be deduced by the human mind, but rather that, given these facts, which are provided by experience, they can all be understood in terms of this universal system of explanation. The concept of God serves as the first principle of this system, from which all else follows with logical necessity. Thus, it is only with reference to the

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[5] Jones, pg.194

[6] This is, in fact, the criticism most often leveled at Spinoza's system. While all acknowledge that his system is brilliant, many see it as a large tautology, where Spinoza's conclusions naturally follow from his premises, since he defined his premises in such a way that only his conclusions could follow. This criticism will be addressed later on.

> concept of God that we can have adequate knowledge of anything in nature, including our emotions and their causes. Any knowledge that does not have its source in rationally grounded principles, and ultimately in God, is attributed by Spinoza to the imagination, which in turn is viewed as the source of man's bondage to the passions and hence of human misery. *We can therefore see that two of the major tasks incumbent upon Spinoza are to show how genuine knowledge differs from the products of the imagination, and how a knowledge of God is possible for man. These are the central themes of his epistemology*(italics mine).[7]

Spinoza begins his epistemological task by demonstrating how he knew that his premises were true ones rather than arbitrary definitions. According to Wolfson, Spinoza uses two criteria of truthfulness, one external and one internal.[8] The external criterion is the correspondence criterion - i.e., that the idea corresponds to its object in reality in such a way that the idea matches reality in a sensible way. The internal criterion is self-consistency and self-evidence, i.e., that the idea is true because it is evident by itself and consistent with itself.[9] Both kinds of criteria could lead to true ideas. As Wolfson explains

> '... a definition either explains a thing as it exists outside the understanding...or else a definition explains a thing as it is conceived or can be conceived by us.' Of the former, he [Spinoza] says previously, it 'ought to be true,' whereas 'the latter need not be,' that is to say, it need not be true in the sense of corresponding to something outside the understanding, for while the truth of the former is to be tested by its correspondence to an external object, the truth of the

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[7] Allison, pp.46-47

[8] Wolfson, pg.99

[9] Wolfson, pg.99

latter consists in its internal consistency.[10]

Thus Spinoza distinguishes between two types of definitions: the one that merely says what a word means and the one that "explains a thing as it exists outside of the understanding"[11] i.e. the one that explains a thing rather than a name. Spinoza feels that his definitions are of the latter variety; in other words, they are true propositions that describe the essence of the things named.[12]

Spinoza justifies this position by applying the same criterion to his definitions that the mathematician applies to his, i.e. when a definition is so stated that it allows the mathematician to construct a given figure and deduce all of its properties from that definition, then the true definition, the one that defines that figure's essence, has been arrived at. Spinoza uses the example of the circle. One definition, the common one, of the circle as "a figure, such that all straight lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal" is no good, as it simply defines what one means by the word circle. The proper definition, also termed the genetic definition, is "the figure described by any line whereof one end is fixed and the other free". This definition tells how to construct such a figure, and from this rule of construction

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[10] Wolfson, pg.101

[11] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.52

[12] Allison, pg.53

all of the circle's properties can be derived.[13] What is true of mathematics, Spinoza argues, is also true about our knowledge of reality. Thus, as Allison says,

> ...we have a real definition, adequate, true or clear and distinct idea of a thing insofar as we know its "proximate cause" and can see how its properties necessarily follow from this cause. "For, in reality," Spinoza writes, "the knowledge of an effect is nothing else than the acquisition of a more perfect knowledge of its cause." Moreover, in such instances there is no room for doubt of the kind envisioned by Descartes. When the mind has a true idea it immediately knows it to be true; as it grasps the logical necessity with which the properties of the object follow from the idea. The metaphysician as well as the mathematician can therefore arrive at genetic definitions of things, and it is through these definitions that he acquires rationally grounded knowledge.[14]

This process, however, can lead to confusion, for if a thing can only be known truly by reference to its preceding causes, then there is the danger of running into an infinite regression that causes the quest for knowledge to be hopeless. Thus Spinoza introduces his idea of God, a God who is self-caused and is the single first principle demanded by logic[15]. Thus God for Spinoza is a necessary thing, for God is the ground of being, a concept that is demanded by necessity, and everything that is and everything God does likewise flows in

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[13] Allison, pg.53

[14] Allison, pp.53-54

[15] This chapter is not the place to go into further aspects of Spinoza's theology as this chapter's primary focus is his epistemological system. Suffice it to say at this point that God is necessary for there to be order to the universe, and the question of how the human mind can be sure that there is such a ground of being will be taken up in the discussion on human knowledge below.

accord with the strict demands of necessity and logic - demands that are inherent in the very nature of God and reality. As Spinoza says,

> [We must come to see] that from God's supreme power, or infinite nature, an infinite number of things - that is, all things have necessarily flowed forth in an infinite number of ways, or always follow from the same necessity; in the same way as from the nature of the triangle it follows from eternity and for eternity, that its three interior angles are equal to two right angles.[16]

The universe, for Spinoza, is one vast mathematical system - from its first cause to all of its variety. If one can simply arrive at the proper definitions, axioms, and postulates, all else falls into place, for reality proceeds by strict rules of logic and necessity, rules that the human mind, if it works hard enough, is capable of perceiving, deducing, and understanding.

The idea of God is important to Spinoza in another sense as well. Without God, as Spinoza defines the Deity, it is impossible to speak of anyone possessing real knowledge in any meaningful sense of the term. In order to understand how this is so, it is necessary to delve briefly into Spinoza's view of substance and how God exists. While this is not the place to go into an extensive review of Spinoza's proofs (that will be saved for the next chapter), his conclusions must be understood in order to see how it is that humans can achieve true knowledge.

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[16] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.54

Basically, Spinoza argues that such a thing called substance exists. Substance is an old philosophical concept, but Spinoza gives it new meaning. Substance is defined as "that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception."[17] Substance, therefore, is the sum total of all that exists in the universe. Substance, however, does not exist unmodified. Two other concepts are central to understanding how substance and the universe interact; the concepts of attributes and modes.[18] An attribute is "that which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance"[19] while a mode is "the modifications of substance, or that which exists in, and is conceived through something other than itself."[20] Proceeding from these definitions, it is easy for Spinoza to establish that the only real substance in the universe is God, as God and substance are both the ground of being and are therefore one and the same. God is, therefore, "a substance consisting of infinite attributes."[21] Since there is only one substance with infinite attributes that exists, this substance must be

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[17] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.58

[18] Substance and the reality of the universe will turn out to be one and the same, but I don't want to get ahead of myself here.

[19] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.58

[20] Ibid

[21] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.59

equivalent to nature, and thus there can be only one universal order in relation to which all things can be understood.[22] All other things in the universe therefore are merely modes of certain attributes of God. By virtue of this sharing in the substance of God, however, it becomes possible for the universe to be intelligibly understood by a finite mind. Thus human beings, whose intellects can perceive only the attributes of thought and extension among God's infinite attributes, can nevertheless share in and perceive accurately the true essence of substance, since the attributes are merely a type of limited perspective on the one true substance. This explains, then, how it is possible for humans to achieve true knowledge.

But how exactly does this process work? For Spinoza, thought is one of the attributes of God, and it finds its expression in the infinite intellect.[23] Since this thought is infinite, "in God there is necessarily the idea not only of his essence, but also of all things which necessarily follow from his essence."[24] This implies, as Allison says,

> ...that the realm of thought constitutes a unified, closed deductive system, and this becomes explicit in the next proposition: "The actual being of ideas owns God as its cause, only in so far as God is considered as a thinking thing, not in so far as he is unfolded in any other attribute; that is, the ideas both of the

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[22] Allison, pg.65

[23] Allison, pg.90

[24] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.90

> attributes of God and of particular things do not own as their efficient cause their objects or the things perceived, but God himself in so far as he is a thinking thing" (Prop.V). God...is really equivalent to thought, viewed as an attribute, so that Spinoza's point is simply that each idea must be caused by another modification of thought, that is, by another idea, and this is what makes the realm of thought a self-contained system.[25]

But remember that thought is merely one attribute of God, and that, on a larger scale all attributes are merely different expressions of the same thing. Thus thought is merely one particular expression of the universal order, and this allows Spinoza to claim that "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things."[26] Thus, in a very real sense, ideas are the same as reality, and therefore clear and distinct ideas of things will in fact give one true knowledge of the nature of reality. As Spinoza puts it

> Substance thinking and substance extended are one and the same substance, comprehended now through one attribute, now through the other. So, also, a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, though expressed in two ways.[27]

Spinoza proceeds from this foundation to a discussion of the types of knowledge that the human mind can perceive and know. These types of knowledge fall into three categories: ideas according to the common order of nature, ideas based on the common notions and adequate ideas of things, and ideas

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[25] Allison, pg.90

[26] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.90

[27] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.91

based on intuition. The last two types of ideas lead to what Spinoza calls true knowledge, while the first leads to incomplete knowledge or what Spinoza calls error. In order to completely understand how these three types of knowledge exist however, it first must be made clear that for Spinoza there is no such thing as a truly "wrong" idea. All ideas to some extent partake of the ideas of God, and, as such, can never be completely incorrect. Rather, an idea can be adequate or inadequate, depending on how much it partakes of the infinite essence of thought that characterizes God's thinking. As was stated earlier, an adequate idea for Spinoza is one from which all of the properties of its object can be deduced. Thus, for an idea to be truly adequate, it must take into account all the causes leading up to the idea and all the conclusions that follow from it. For example, take the idea of a triangle. The mathematician's idea of a triangle is adequate because he or she can derive all of its properties from it, while a layman's idea of a triangle is not, because while the layman may understand that a triangle has three sides he or she does not fully know what follows from this idea. Thus the mathematician possesses a true concept of the idea triangle, while the layman does not. Note that the layman's idea of a triangle is not really false, but is rather incomplete, which for Spinoza is the equivalent of error. Because of this characterization of what constitutes a true idea, it is easy for Spinoza to push aside doubt or uncertainty once an

adequate idea is conceived. As Spinoza says "He who has a true idea simultaneously knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt of the truth of the thing perceived."[28] This is so because to have a true idea is to know everything about the object of that idea, so that nothing remains ambiguous, nothing is left unexplained, nothing is undetermined and nothing is uncertain.[29] There is no rational basis for doubt, and no need to appeal to any outside something in order for a person to be sure they have a true idea.

Knowledge, then, can either be complete or incomplete, depending upon what it is based. Knowledge of the first type, knowledge according to the common order of nature, is knowledge that is based on sense perception, memory, or imagination. This is knowledge that is inherently faulty, for by its very nature it fails to see the complete picture of causality. Spinoza begins by asserting that there is no way to perceive anything in the outside world without recourse to the human body - the human body is, very simply, the focal point from and through which the human mind perceives the outside world.[30] This perception by the body limits one by only allowing one to see things as they appear, rather than as they are. Spinoza gives the example of someone looking at the sun. To all appearances, the sun seems to be very small and

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[28] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.100

[29] Allison, pg.100

[30] Allison, pg.103

only 200 feet away. This is not a false idea, for this is indeed how the sun does appear. However, it is an inadequate idea, since the reality is that the sun is very large and very far away. For Spinoza, this exemplifies the trap of relying on sense perception for adequate knowledge, since the appearance of things is often not their reality.[31] A similar case can be made for memory. Spinoza asserts that people form memories on the basis of association, rather than on any type of reality. He gives the example of a soldier and a farmer seeing the tracks of a horse in the ground. The soldier will tend to think of a horseman, and then of war, while the farmer will tend to think of a plough and a field. Neither of the two are incorrect, for they are following what to each of them is a natural train of thought, but neither are they being logical and these memories can in no way serve as a basis for adequate knowledge.[32] Thus neither sense perception nor memory can serve as a base of adequate knowledge, and the first type of knowledge in no way leads to true knowledge.

The second type of knowledge has already been discussed above. This is knowledge based on the deductive process, knowledge wherein ideas put together in a logical order infallibly lead to one another and lead to conclusions that cannot be refuted. There are two types of this knowledge:

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[31] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.102. Note the striking difference between this approach and Dewey's approach to the problem of the refracting sphere.

[32] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.105

knowledge based on common notions - ideas that are common to all bodies but do not require experience to be derived (such as the laws of physics, or logic, or mathematics), and knowledge based on the common properties of things - properties that are shared by a given class of things such as the human body (such as human physiology or psychology).[33] Since the mind can possess these ideas, and derive from them other ideas, this type of knowledge is in fact a source of adequate knowledge.[34]

Spinoza then introduces a third source of knowledge, that of intuition. This type of knowledge "proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things."[35] The difference between this third type of knowledge and the second type of knowledge is that while they both reach the same conclusions, the third type of knowledge makes no use of the general principles of reason in order to deduce what it knows. Rather, in intuitive knowledge, the truth is simply apprehended in a flash, enabling the one doing the apprehending to leap from A to C, as it were, without going through B. For Spinoza, this is also an adequate type of knowledge, as it ends up perceiving the true essences of

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[33] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.110

[34] The idea of God and his necessary existence is also something that falls into this category.

[35] Spinoza, in Allison, pg.112

things, which is the acid test for any type of adequate knowledge.[36]

Certain knowledge, therefore, is possible to human beings. By properly utilizing the second and third types of knowledge, a person can get at true knowledge of reality - knowledge that is based in no surer source than the mind of God itself. As Wolfson explains

> In so far as the human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God, it gets its ideas from God;...'we must remember, besides, that our mind, in so far as it truly perceives things, is a part of the infinite intellect of God, and therefore it must be that the clear and distinct ideas of the mind are as true as those of God.' But on the other hand, inasmuch as the God of Spinoza is not an external cause from whom the human mind emanates or by whom it is created, but is rather an immanent cause within which the human mind is contained or the whole of the human mind is a part, to say that the human mind gets its ideas from God means that the ideas are generated within it and do not come from any source which may be called external in any sense whatsoever.[37]

This then completes the discussion of Spinoza's epistemology. Spinoza is a true rationalist, one who holds that it is through ideas and their logical interconnections that one understands the essence of reality. This reality is grounded in the idea of God, without which there would be no logical order and no way to achieve certain knowledge. The nature of this God is such that all things are as they necessarily must be, and that all that happens does so

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[36] Nothing could be further from the pragmatic test for knowledge!

[37] Wolfson, pp.157-158

according to fully intelligible natural laws, a subject that will be taken up in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Spinoza's Concept of God

As mentioned earlier, Spinoza, like Kaplan, is a naturalist theologian, but unlike Kaplan, he is first and foremost a philosopher and consequently has a fully worked out concept of God. Borrowing the geometrical method of Descartes (as explained in the previous chapter), Spinoza begins his exposition[1] with his basic assumptions and definitions and then proceeds to deduce from them the only concept of God that is coherent with the truth as he sees it. Spinoza begins by defining substance, attributes and modes, and proceeds from these definitions to prove that God and substance are one, and that this substance or God must be identified with the natural laws that run the universe. As Wolfson says

> Spinoza seems to address his imaginary opponents as follows: All you mediaevals, to whatever school of thought you may belong, have builded your philosophies on the conception of a God epitomized by you in a formal definition which contains four characteristic expressions. You say that God is (1) *ens* in the highest sense of the term, by which you mean that He is a being who exists necessarily. You also say that He is (2) "absolutely infinite," by which you mean that He is (3) "a substance consisting of infinite attributes," (4) "each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence". God so defined you call absolute substance; you differentiate Him from the world which you call conditional substance, and then you declare that the relation between the absolute and the conditional substance is like that of creator to created. In opposition to you, I deny at the very outset the existence of a God outside the world and of His relation to the world as creator. Still, unaccustomed as I am to dispute about mere names, I shall retain your own term

[1] Spinoza's great work, the Ethics, contains his fully worked out system in its geometrical form, but his system is implicit in all of his works and underlies their conclusions.

substance as a philosophic surrogate to the pious name God, and in your own terms I am going to unfold a new conception of the nature of God and of his relation to the world.

To begin with, I shall abandon your distinction between absolute substance and conditional substance, but shall use the term substance in that restrictive sense in which you use the expression absolute substance. Then, what you call conditional substance, or the world, I shall call mode. Furthermore, unlike you, I shall not describe the relation of substance to mode as that of creator to created, but rather as that of whole to part, or, to be more exact, as that of universal to particular. The reason for my disagreeing with you on the question of the causal relation between God and the world is that I find your doctrine of creation, however you may try to explain it, an untenable hypothesis. Barring this difference between us, a difference which, I must confess, is fundamental and far-reaching in its effect, I am going to describe my substance in all those terms which you make use of in describing your God. Like your God, my substance is (1) the highest kind of *ens*, for existence appertains to its nature. (2) It is also absolutely infinite. (3) Furthermore, it consists of infinite attributes. (4) Finally, each of its attributes expresses eternal and infinite essence. I have thus described my substance in all those terms which you use in your formal definition of God. Consequently, as I am now to reproduce your proofs of the existence of God to prove the existence of my substance, I shall bracket together the terms God and substance...[2]

Spinoza therefore defines God as a

> ...Being consisting of infinite attributes of which each is infinite, or in the highest degree perfect of its kind. Here it should be noted that I understand by attribute all that which is conceived through itself, and in itself; so that its conception does not involve the conception of some other thing...That this is, indeed, the true definition of God is clear from the fact that we understand by God a Being supremely perfect, and absolutely infinite. That such a Being exists, it is easy to prove from this definition...[3]

But how does Spinoza arrive at the conclusions he does?

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[2] Wolfson, pp.158-159 (vol.I)

[3] The Correspondence of Spinoza, pg.75

He begins with his notion that an adequate idea is immediately perceived by the mind to be true.[4] He then goes on to state that "...God's existence is not self-evident, it must be inferred from ideas so firmly and incontrovertibly true, that no power can be postulated or conceived sufficient to impugn them."[5] Since an adequate idea qualifies as an idea that is firmly and incontrovertibly true, he can respond to his critics in perfect confidence

> To your question whether I have as clear an idea of God as I have of a triangle, I answer in the affirmative. But if you ask me whether I have as clear a mental image of God as I have of a triangle, I shall answer No. For we cannot imagine God, but we can, indeed, conceive Him. Here also it should be noted that I do not say that I know God entirely, but only that I understand some of his attributes, though not all, nor even the greater part of them, and it is certain that our ignorance of the majority of them does not hinder our having a knowledge of some of them. When I learnt Euclid's elements I first understood that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and I clearly perceived this property of a triangle even though I was ignorant of many others.[6]

But what are the adequate ideas that lead up to Spinoza's conclusions about God? The most complete presentation of these ideas is found in The Ethics, where Spinoza offers the definitions and axioms that will serve as the basis for his propositions and lead to his deductions.[7]

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[4] Discussed in the chapter on Spinoza's epistemology.

[5] The Theological-Political Tractate, pg.84

[6] The Correspondence of Spinoza, pg.289

[7] It is important to keep in mind that for Spinoza, these definitions and axioms (and the propositions that are proved from them) arise from clear and adequate ideas that are therefore true,

These definitions and axioms read as follows:

DEFINITIONS

1. By that which is self-caused I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing.
2. A thing is said to be finite in its own kind when it can be limited by another thing of the same nature...body is not limited by thought, nor thought by body.
3. By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived in itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed.
4. By attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence.
5. By mode I mean the affections of substance; that is, that which is in something else and is conceived through something else.
6. By God I mean an absolutely infinite being; that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence...

AXIOMS

1. All things that are, are either in themselves or in something else.
2. That which cannot be conceived through another thing must be conceived through itself.
3. From a given determinate cause there necessarily follows an effect; on the other hand, if there be no determinate cause it is impossible that an effect should follow.
4. The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of the cause.
5. Things which have nothing in common with each other cannot be understood through each other; that is, the conception of the one does not involve the conception of the other.
6. A true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea.
7. If a thing can be conceived as not existing, then its essence does not involve existence.[8]

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and are not simply the result of arbitrary definitions that lead to the conclusions Spinoza wants to reach. This is, of course, the most common criticism of Spinoza's system, but it will be addressed later in the chapter. It is important to stress, however, that Spinoza himself would not accept this as a valid criticism of his work.

[8] The Ethics, pp.31-32

From these, Spinoza goes on to prove three key propositions: that there is only one substance, that this substance consists of infinite attributes, and that this substance must be identical with God.

Spinoza devotes the first five propositions of The Ethics to showing that there cannot be more than one substance possessing the same nature or attribute.[9] In summary form, the argument runs as follows: Since an attribute is not a property but an expression of the nature of substance, two substances with the same attribute would have the same nature; they would essentially be one and the same identical substance.[10] Thus, as Spinoza says in proposition #5, "In the universe there cannot be two or more substances having the same nature or attribute."[11] There also cannot be several substances with distinct natures interacting with each other, because based on axiom #5, "two substances having different attributes have nothing in common"[12], "When things have nothing in common, one cannot be the cause of the other"[13], and therefore "One substance cannot be produced by another substance."[14] Since one substance cannot produce another substance, and since

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[9] Allison, pg.61

[10] Allison, pg.61

[11] The Ethics, pg.33

[12] The Ethics, pg.32, proposition #2.

[13] Ibid, proposition #3.

[14] Ibid, pg.33, proposition #6.

there cannot be two or more substances possessing the same attribute, it follows that there is most likely only one substance.

At this point, there is only one remaining possibility that would allow for more than one substance to exist, and that is the possibility that "there are a distinct plurality of substances which do not stand in causal relation to one another and do not interact in any way."[15] This is also not possible, as Spinoza proceeds to demonstrate. Proposition 7 reads "Existence belongs to the nature of substance"[16]. Spinoza's proof is simple. Since substance cannot be produced by anything else[17] it must therefore be self-caused, and by definition #1 (above), its essence must then necessarily involve existence.[18] In addition, "Every substance is necessarily infinite."[19] Again, the proof is simple. Substance must be finite or infinite. To be finite however, it would have to be limited by another substance of the same nature (according to definition #2 above). However, because there cannot be two substances of the same nature (proposition

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[15] Allison, pg.61

[16] The Ethics, pg.34

[17] This is a corollary to proposition #6 above - since substance cannot cause another substance, and in the universe there exists nothing but substances (as shown by Ax.1 and Defs.3 and 5), it follows that there is nothing that can cause substance to exist. [The Ethics, pg.33, corollary to proposition #6]

[18] The Ethics, pg.34, proposition #7.

[19] Ibid, proposition #8

#5), viewing substance as finite is clearly absurd. Therefore, it must be infinite.[20] Since "the more reality or being a thing has, the more attributes it has"[21], and since substance is infinite, it follows that substance possesses infinite attributes.[22] This means however that

> Since substance possesses infinite attributes or all reality, there is literally nothing which could conceivably exist apart from substance, so that the possibility of a plurality of substances with different natures, which do not stand in causal relations with one another, is no longer available.[23]

Thus, there is one and only one substance, and it possesses infinite attributes.

In order to prove that God must be equivalent to this one substance, Spinoza must show that God in fact exists. To do this, Spinoza offers three versions of what is known as the ontological proof and, as an afterthought, one version of the cosmological proof.[24] The ontological proof begins with the fact that God as an object is immediately perceivable to human consciousness as an intuition, as a clear and distinct idea and therefore a true one.[25] One could wonder, of course, why a proof is necessary if God can be perceived directly by human

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[20] Ibid

[21] Ibid, pg.36, proposition #9. Spinoza argues that the proof of this is evident from definition #4.

[22] Allison, pg.64

[23] Ibid

[24] Wolfson, pg.178

[25] Ibid, pg.165

intuition - after all, if God is perceived, what is there to prove? Wolfson answers this question in the following way

> What is the significance of the syllogism in the ontological proof? The answer is that the syllogism adds nothing to the major premise. But still it is not altogether redundant. It may be said that the proposition function of the ontological proof is like that of the proposition of an analytical judgement, in which the predicate adds nothing to the subject, and still its use is not altogether unjustifiable...Just as propositions are either analytic or synthetic, so are syllogisms also either analytic or synthetic, and the relation of the analytical syllogism to the major premise is like that of the analytical proposition to the subject...The ontological proof for the existence of God is an analytical syllogism just as the proposition "God is existent" is an analytical judgment, and the relation of the syllogism in the ontological proof to the major premise is like the relation of the proposition "God is existent" to the subject "God". Neither of them adds anything to the contents of its respective subject or major premise with which it starts, but both of them analyze the contents of their respective subject and major premise..it translates a conviction into an argument. It elicits a truth which is only implicitly contained in the major premise. It puts an immediate fact of consciousness in the form of a syllogistic reasoning. It resolves an idea into its component parts. Thus when Spinoza proves the existence of God ontologically, he does not pretend to arrive at a newly discovered fact, but rather to restate in formal language a fact already known.[26]

Spinoza begins his proof by stating the proposition (#11) under consideration. It reads, "God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists."[27] He then offers the

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[26] Ibid, pp.174-175

[27] The Ethics, pg.37, proposition #11. It can be argued that here Spinoza is at his most circular, for proposition 11 is almost identical to definition #6, with the only new information being that God necessarily exists. Since he has already proved that substance must exist (prop.#7) and by definition #6 God is substance, it already follows that God must exist, merely from the

four proofs, which Wolfson summarizes in syllogistic form as follows

> Proof #1: If we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being whose essence involves existence, then God is immediately perceived by us to exist.
>
> But we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being whose essence involves existence.
>
> Therefore, God is immediately perceived by us to exist.[28]
>
> Proof #2: If we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being whose existence is necessary by his own nature, then God is immediately perceived by us to exist.
>
> But we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being whose existence is necessary by His own nature.
>
> Therefore, God is immediately perceived by us to exist.[29]
>
> Proof #3: We have the idea of the existence of ourselves as finite beings and we also have the idea of the existence of God as an infinite being.
>
> There are three possibilities as to the truth of these ideas.
>
> First, they are both false, and therefore "nothing exists."
>
> Second, only the idea of our own existence is true, and therefore, "there is nothing which necessarily exists excepting things finite.
>
> Third, both ideas are true, and therefore a "being absolutely infinite also exists."
>
> The first of these possibilities is to be rejected, for "we ourselves exist."
>
> The second possibility is to be rejected, for "if,

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way Spinoza has defined his terms. In Spinoza's defense, however, it is important to remember what Wolfson has said, namely, that "[Spinoza] does not pretend to arrive at a newly discovered fact, but rather to restate in formal language a fact already known." In a very real sense, this is the purpose of the entire Ethics - to restate in the formal language of the geometric method ideas that are already adequately perceived and therefore true. As far as Spinoza is concerned, he has already perceived the truth, and he knows it to be the truth because of his epistemological position that the mind can immediately recognize the truth of an adequate idea. The geometric method, therefore, serves merely to help clarify and explain his thinking, most likely for the benefit of others who wish to follow his train of thought.

[28] Wolfson, pg. 184, vol.I

[29] Ibid, pg.199

therefore, there is nothing which necessarily exists excepting things finite, it follows that things finite are more powerful than the absolutely infinite being, and this (as is self-evident) is absurd."[30]

Consequently, the third possibility must be true, and "therefore the being absolutely infinite, that is to say, God, necessarily exists."[31]

Proof #4: If we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being of the highest power, then God is immediately perceived by us to exist.

But we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being of the highest power.

Therefore, God is immediately perceived by us to exist.[32]

Having proved to his satisfaction that God necessarily exists, it is child's play for Spinoza to prove the equivalence of God to the one substance. Since by definition #6 God expresses all the attributes of substance, and by proposition #11 God necessarily exists, if there existed any other substance besides God, that substance would have to explicated through some attribute of God, which would lead to two different substances having the same attribute, which is impossible according to proposition #5. Therefore, Spinoza offers proposition #14, that "There can be, or be conceived,

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[30] The absurdity is as follows: If we exist and God does not exist, then we must exist in ourselves. Therefore, the idea we have of our own existence is more powerful than the idea we have of God's existence. But we have started out with the assumption that we have an idea of God as infinite and of ourselves as finite. Hence, a contradiction. (Ibid, pg.206)

[31] Ibid, pp.205-207. Wolfson also points out that this proof is really a proof from power, and is therefore technically a form of the cosmological proof (proof from creation) rather than an ontological proof.

[32] Ibid, pg.208. This fourth proof is, according to Wolfson, merely an ontological version of the previous cosmological proof.

no other substance but God"[33] and its corollary that "...God is one: that is, in the whole universe there is only one substance, and this is absolutely infinite..."[34] i.e. there is only one substance, it possesses infinite attributes, and that substance is God.[35]

If God is the only substance that exists, however, then logic demands that God be identified with the sum-total of the universe - all objects that are in it, all laws that run it, all things that happen in it. In short, God is equivalent to nature! As Spinoza says

> Nature herself is the power of God under another name, and our ignorance of the power of God is co-extensive with our ignorance of Nature. It is absolute folly, therefore, to ascribe an event to the power of God when we know not its natural cause, which is the power of God.[36]

This equivalence manifests itself in two distinct ways, for Spinoza draws a crucial distinction in his conception of nature - the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. *Natura naturans* is nature regarded as active, that which

> ...is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express eternal and

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[33] The Ethics, pg.39

[34] Ibid, pg.40

[35] Again it can be argued that this whole system is circular, since the conclusions are evident in the premises Spinoza chooses, but it is certain that Spinoza did not think this was so, for he felt he was explaining in logical form what he perceived to be true (see note 27).

[36] The Theological-Political Tractate, pg.25

> infinite essence, i.e. God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause...[37]

while *natura naturata* is nature regarded as passive, that which

> ...follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from any of God's attributes, or all the modes of God's attributes, insofar as they are considered things which are in God, and which can neither be nor conceived without God.[38]

God, when identified with *natura naturans*, refers to the natural order of the universe, the fundamental laws that make it work as it does, the laws that cause things to come into being and to decay. Simply put, God in this sense is the term we use to describe the natural forces in the universe. As Spinoza says

> By the Help of God, I mean the fixed and unchangeable order of nature or the chain of natural events: for I have said before and shown elsewhere that the universal laws of nature, according to which all things exist and are determined, are only another name for the eternal decrees of God, which always involve eternal truth and necessity.
>
> So that to say that everything happens according to natural laws, and to say that everything is ordained by the decree and ordinance of God is the same thing. Now...the power in nature is identical with the power of God, by which alone all things happen and are determined...[39]

While God, as *natura naturata*, is identified with and bound up in the things that happen and are determined.

Spinoza can do this because of the nature of the modal

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[37] Spinoza, in Curley, pg.37

[38] Ibid

[39] The Theological-Political Tractate, pp.44-45

system he has so painstakingly created. It is not enough to say that there exists one substance of infinite attributes. Additionally, it remains to explain what that substance "does", or how its nature is expressed. This expression takes the form of modes that are expressed through attributes. As Spinoza made clear in his definitions (see above), an attribute is the way the intellect perceives substance, while a mode is the way substance is manipulated into the forms of finite things. Allison explains the nature of an attribute as follows

> The view which we offer here is that attributes can best be regarded as aspects of substance or perspectives in terms of which it can be conceived...let us briefly consider an analogy between the way in which the intellect perceives substance and the way in which we ordinarily perceive objects in sense perception. Every object, it can be claimed, is necessarily perceived from a certain perspective or point of view. We never simply perceive the table, but always from the front, behind, above, etc. The "real table" would only be fully revealed through the sum of all possible perspectives. Nevertheless, each distinct perspective does not merely acquaint us with a property, or even a separable part of the table, but rather with the table as a table, i.e., as a distinct, unified entry, albeit perceived from a particular limited point of view. Much the same can be said for Spinoza's attributes. Each of them *is* substance, although substance as grasped from a particular point of view.[40]

Attributes are then modified, through the modes, to form the categories and concepts and objects and ideas that make up the every day world. As Spinoza says about modes

> Particular things are nothing but affections of the attributes of God; that is, modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate

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[40] Allison, pg.59

way.[41]

Spinoza then goes into a long discussion about different types of modes, but for the purposes of this thesis it is enough to keep in mind that modes simply are the way in which attributes[42] "become" the natural order. Thus, by way of example, take a meteor. It represents several modes of the attribute of extension. It is made up of matter, matter that was formed by certain processes and laws. Those laws represent one type of mode, while the matter itself represents a different type of mode.[43] The matter has certain characteristics - motion, color, hardness, all of which represent modes of substance in the attribute of extension. Some of these modes derive directly from the nature of an attribute, while some derive from the nature of the modes themselves. But all eventually derive from attributes, and therefore all derive from substance, and therefore derive from God. Because of this, Spinoza can say with perfect confidence that God is one with the universe, and that God is one with the order and power of nature. This does not mean that somehow God is mystically one with everything, but that rather, in the final analysis, all is dependent on God. God

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[41] The Ethics, pg.49

[42] Specifically, the attributes of thought and extension. Even though Spinoza held that there were infinite attributes, he also held that thought and extension were the only ones perceivable to the human senses and intellect. Allison, pg.59.

[43] Specifically, an immediate mode and a mediate mode respectively.

as *natura naturans* is one with the fundamental laws of the universe and "allows"[44] the universe to exist, while God as *natura naturata* provides the substance that makes up the universe. Properly speaking then, for Spinoza God is to be directly identified with *natura naturans* and not *natura naturata*. *Natura naturata* is dependent on God, and made up of God's substance, but is not God *per se*.[45] Spinoza's system is thus a pantheism, but a very sophisticated one - one in which God makes up all, but in two very distinct, very different forms. Curley explains this distinction in the following fashion

> ...God, considered as free cause (= all of the attributes of substance), produces and acts on things other than God (= the modes, both finite and infinite) in virtue of the laws of his own nature (= the laws of the attributes which constitute his nature), and that those things other than God must be understood to follow from those laws. One of the attributes which constitute the nature of substance is extension. So we must think of extension as involving certain laws...we must think of the attributes as having laws "inscribed in them, as in their true codes" - and we must think of the infinite modes of extension , and of particular finite bodies, as following from those laws.[46]

All depends on God - active nature, for the laws that make it up (the laws that are identified with God), and passive nature, for the modifications of substance that give the laws

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[44] The universe is necessary, as will be taken up later. God has no choice or free will when it comes to the universe, so "allows" should not be understood here to imply choice, thus the quotation marks.

[45] Curley, pg.37

[46] Curley, pg.38

something to act on. God is thus the be all and the end all - in a very real sense, all that there is, is God.

What's more, God does not have any choice in any of the things that God does. God is self-caused, but not free-willed. "Neither intellect nor will pertain to the nature of God."[47] Because the nature of the divine includes necessary existence and immediate understanding of that existence, as soon as God understands, God acts, so that there is no possibility of God doing anything differently than what God is already doing. It does not exist even as a possibility, for if it did, it would be, which would then involve a contradiction. God simply is, and reality is what it is necessarily, as it comes directly from the nature of God. As Spinoza explains it

> Proposition 33: Things could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case.
>
> Proof: All things have necessarily followed from the nature of God and have been determined to exist and to act in a definite way from the necessity of God's nature. Therefore if things could have been of a different nature or been determined to act in a different way so that the order of Nature would have been different, then God's nature, too, could have been other than it now is, and therefore this different nature would have had to exist, and consequently there would have been two or more Gods, which is absurd. Therefore things could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case.[48]
>
> Now, as nothing is necessarily true save only by Divine decree, it is plain that the universal laws of nature are decrees of God following from the necessity

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[47] The Ethics, pg.44

[48] The Ethics, pg.54

> and perfection of the Divine nature. Hence, any event happening in nature which contravened nature's universal laws, would necessarily also contravene the Divine decree, nature, and understanding; or if anyone asserted that God acts in contravention to the laws of nature, he, *ipso facto*, would be compelled to assert that God acted against His own nature - an evident absurdity...Nothing, then, comes to pass in nature in contravention to her universal laws, nay, everything agrees with them and follows from them, for whatsoever comes to pass, comes to pass by the will and eternal decree of God; that is, as we have just pointed out, whatever comes to pass, comes to pass according to laws and rules which involve eternal necessity and truth; nature, therefore, always observes laws and rules which involve eternal necessity and truth, although they may not all be known to us, and therefore she keeps a fixed and immutable order.[49]

and

> ...in no way do I subject God to fate, but I conceive that everything follows with inevitable necessity from the nature of God, just as all conceive that it follows from the nature of God himself that He should understand Himself.[50]

Thus, all is necessary, everything is as it must be, and there is no room for intellect, will or miracles on the part of God.

Its very easy to see that this view of God is a far cry from the traditional theistic concept of God. No wonder Spinoza's contemporaries accused him of atheism. No matter what one thinks of the validity or workability of his metaphysical system, Spinoza is open to the attack that he has made a radical break with any usual concept of deity. As Copleston says

> We can argue, if we like, that he [Spinoza] sought a philosophically tenable concept of God. But the search ends in sheer naturalism. What Spinoza actually does is

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[49] The Theological-Political Tractate, pg.83

[50] Correspondence of Spinoza, pg.347

> to present a certain view of the world or the universe. To call the world 'God' is an idiosyncracy on his part. It does not alter the plain fact that the world is the world and not at all what is commonly understood by the term God...Talk about God really confuses the issue. For it obscures the fact that Spinoza is thinking in purely naturalistic terms. In ordinary language 'God' signifies a supernatural being. In Spinoza's philosophy the supernatural is conspicuous by its absence. Whatever therefore he himself may have thought, with his religious upbringing and living, as he did, at a time when theological themes were still living issues, his system really demands that the word 'God' should be eliminated from it. The situation would then be clarified rather than obfuscated.[51]

Two things mitigate against Copleston's conclusion however. In the first place, Spinoza himself certainly thought that references to God were necessary and was perfectly willing to admit that he had come up with a radically different (although in his opinion correct) view of God. Spinoza in no way considered himself an atheist and was convinced that God existed. As Copleston himself says

> ...it is perhaps worth drawing attention...to... [Spinoza's] endeavour to develop a view of God and of the relation between God and the world which would be, in his opinion, philosophically justified. The working out of this view is found indeed in the system. But behind the system lies Spinoza's rejection of the traditional beliefs instilled into him in childhood, coupled with his lasting conviction that the word 'God' is not devoid of reference. Whatever other people may have done, Spinoza certainly did not regard himself as an atheist...there is no good reason for thinking that his talk about 'God' was insincere. He indignantly rejected the accusation that his aim was to "teach atheism by hidden and disguised arguments." He regarded himself as explaining the 'real' meaning (reference) of the word 'God'.[52]

In the second place, Spinoza uses God as a term to refer

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[51] Copleston in Mandelbaum, pg.228

[52] Ibid, pg.227

to the ground of being, a function that God serves in many different philosophic systems. True, Spinoza's God is not a supernatural God, nor a personal God, but that does not mean that Spinoza's God is incapable of serving as the ground of being. Spinoza's God cannot fill the role of a theistic God, but it does allow for an understanding of reality as a whole and offers a principle for the intelligibility of that reality, as well as a means to explain why it exists. Thus, even though Spinoza's system is a naturalism, it is a naturalism with purpose. And, as Curly says,

> ...it makes a great deal of sense to think of these fundamental laws of nature as God. Once we give up the pseudo-explanation involved in explaining the most fundamental laws of nature in terms of the will of an omnipotent person, those laws do provide the ultimate explanation of events in the world, in the sense that once we have led events back to those laws, there is no further that we can go. They are also ultimate in a deeper sense, in that there are logical reasons why we should not expect to be able to go further...Once you have led your explanation of physical laws back to a principle dealing with all bodies, without qualification, there can be no more fundamental principle that will explain that principle...If this is correct, then we can look on the fundamental laws of nature not only as principles which explain whatever happens in nature, but also as principles which themselves could not, by their very nature, be explained by anything else. I think Spinoza would have regarded that as sufficient ground for thinking that they must be self-explanatory. That everything which exists must have a reason or cause why it exists is one of his deepest assumptions...If the fundamental laws of nature can't, precisely because they are so fundamental, be explained by anything else, then we must regard them as self-explanatory. There is, *and could have been*, nothing other than the fundamental laws themselves which caused them to be what they are. So there is, *and could have been*, nothing which, had it been different, would have led to their being different...They could not have been otherwise. This gives a reasonable sense to the notion of God as a self-sufficient,

necessary being...[53]

Spinoza then, like Kaplan, is a naturalist, in that he accepts the findings of science as describing the working of the universe. Unlike Kaplan, however, Spinoza does not conceive of God as merely a functional idea, to be interpreted anew in every day and age. Spinoza's God is a very real being, albeit not a supernatural nor theistic one. God is the one substance that makes up the universe, and is the principle that insures that reality is intelligible and understandable. Two naturalistic theologians, but two totally different conceptions of God, a difference that will lead to great parallels and great discontinuities in their respective approaches to religious life.

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[53] Curley, pp.43-45

Chapter 6: Spinoza on Ethics and Soteria[1]

As has been alluded to earlier, the particular concept of God that a thinker has determines much about that thinker's position on other issues. A person committed to the idea of a theistic God who has infallibly revealed His or Her will naturally feels that such a revelation provides the last word on many issues, often including, but not limited to, ethics, soteria, and ritual. The ethical is what the theistic God says is ethical. Soteria is achieved by living in concert with the will of God (ritual and ethics) and thereby receiving the awards of such living (in some systems, a blessed life, in others, an eternal after-life, in others a combination of both).[2] In a naturalistic system, since there is no supernatural Deity who has revealed His or Her will, there can be no reference to a supernatural being as a source of either

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[1] Soteria, a term borrowed from Reines, is defined as "ultimate, meaningful existence." It is a state that can only be known through intuition and achieved by introspection. It is a state in which the human being finds living to be worthwhile and fulfilling. The state is such that living carries its own justification - life is so worthwhile that it is a self-evident proposition that one should keep on living and that living has value and meaning. It is a state such that when one is in it, one would rather *be* than not *be*. It is a state in which one does not ask, "why being - why not nothingness?" The state itself is the answer. Existence is its own purpose. It doesn't require pleasure or happiness (but often includes them both), and is roughly equivalent to more traditional terms such as bliss, *summun bonum*, "the good life", etc. (more specifically, soteria is the result of living the "good life").

[2] This list is in no way intended to provide an exhaustive list of the possibilities. The point however, is valid - in a theistic system, the will of the deity will be the final arbiter of all.

ethical behavior or soteria. Thus, a naturalistic thinker must find some other way to ground the ethical and soterial system that he espouses. Spinoza and Kaplan both face this problem, and this chapter and the next will explore the means that each thinker uses to justify their ethical and soterial systems, for both are willing to argue that there is such a thing as ethics and that soteria is indeed possible for the human being. The two subjects are treated together because in both systems, the goal of soteria is what justifies ethics - for both thinkers, the human ability (however limited it might be) to achieve soteria is inextricably bound up in the ethical life, as will be made clear.

Spinoza makes it clear from the outset that he will be able to derive his ideas of ethics and soteria from the same metaphysical system that allowed him to derive his naturalist concept of God. After all, the name of his most famous work is The Ethics, and as Allison says

> The last three parts of the *Ethics* really form a unity, and together they contain what, broadly speaking, can be characterized as Spinoza's moral philosophy. This encompasses an analysis of the human emotions and how men are subject to them; an account of the nature of human virtue, or ethics in the narrow sense of the term, which includes both the presentation of rational rules for living and an analysis of the "good life"; and a theory of human blessedness, which provides a philosophical alternative to the traditional religious doctrine of salvation.[3]

Since Spinoza was committed to a naturalist interpretation of the world, and felt that there was but one substance expressed

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[3] Allison, pg.118

through infinite attributes and modes

> The problem for Spinoza...was to construct an alternative theory...a theory that would recognize that man was a part of nature, as subject to laws as any other part of nature, a theory which would explain human affects without invoking occult causes, a theory which would deal with the troublesome problem of the individual's relationship to the society of which he is a part, would explain why the individual must sometimes subordinate his prima facie interests as an individual to the interests of the whole, and explain what the limits on that subordination are, but also a theory which, while acknowledging the limits to control, would explain how men might control their affects.[4]

Spinoza begins his exposition with the idea that the human being possesses no free will - that freedom of the will is merely an illusion. As Wolfson says

> Our virtues and vices, [Spinoza] is to argue, are not voluntary, our actions do not originate in ourselves, and hence we are not to be praised for our virtues nor blamed for our vices.[5]

Spinoza can make this claim because of the unique way he views the interaction between the body and the mind

> ...mind and body - are one and the same individual thing, conceived now under the attribute of Thought and now under the attribute of Extension...[6]

Since mind and body are one and the same thing (just conceived through a different attribute), it makes no sense to speak of a determined body combined with a free, undetermined will. Rather, both are determined, and in exactly the same way, for as the body is determined by natural law under the attribute

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[4] Curley, pg.106

[5] Wolfson, vol.II, pg.223

[6] The Ethics, pg.81

of extension, so too is the mind under the attribute of thought. As Curley explains

> [Spinoza] deduces that the mind has no absolute or free will by appealing to the mind's status as a determinate mode of the attribute of thought, and the general proposition that all determinate modes of any attribute must be determined by prior determinate modes of that attribute in a causal sequence which extends to infinity.[7]

Since the mind is determined by prior modes, it simply can't possess free will.

At this point, some would argue that Spinoza is simply wrong, and that everyday experience provides ample examples of the exercise of free will. Not true, says Spinoza. In fact, everyday experience shows just the opposite. As Allison explains

> But what about our ordinary experience? Does this not provide ample evidence of the mind's ability to exercise control over the body? Again Spinoza's answer is a categorical no. "Experience," he points out sarcastically, "abundantly shows that men can govern anything more easily than their tongues, and restrain anything more easily than their appetites." Moreover, people only tend to believe that they are free in regard to their moderate appetites and desires which they are able to control, but not with regard to their stronger desires and more violent appetites, which often prove irresistible. Yet this distinction is illusory, and it stems from an ignorance of true causes. The truth of the matter...is that there simply is no such thing as a volition or mental decision distinct from a bodily appetite, through which an individual either resists or yields to that appetite. On the contrary, he asserts: "A mental decision and a bodily appetite, or determined state, are simultaneous, or rather are one and the same thing, which we call decision, when it is regarded under and explained through the attribute of thought, and a conditioned state, when it is regarded under the attribute of extension, and deduced from the laws of

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[7] Curley, pg.79

motion and rest."[8]

Clearly then, for Spinoza there is no free will.

So far, all of Spinoza's conclusions follow logically from his view of the nature of reality. If all that is follows necessarily from the nature of God and if all that is is exactly how it must and necessarily be, it makes perfect sense that human action also behaves in this way. At this point, however, Spinoza runs into a difficulty. How can one realistically speak of ethics and soteria? If everything a human being does is determined, and human beings have no volition, how can one pass judgements on human behavior? It makes no sense whatsoever to speak of right and wrong and good and bad and of soterial living in a framework which does not allow for choice. How can an action be called ethical or otherwise, if the being who engaged in the action had no choice in the matter? It makes about as much sense as calling an earthquake or a tornado immoral or unethical. Natural forces, as well as human actions, simply are - they are determined by antecedent conditions, and to label them good or bad is simply meaningless.

Spinoza, of course, is aware of this difficulty. As he says

> I confess that some profane men...may, from what I have said, assume a licence to sin, and without any reason, at the simple dictates of their lusts conclude that Scripture is everywhere faulty and falsified...but such men are beyond the reach of help, for nothing, as

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[8] Allison, pg.123

> the proverb has it, can be so rightly said that it cannot be twisted into wrong. Those who wish to give reign to their lusts are at no loss for an excuse...Human nature...has always been the same, and in every age virtue has been exceedingly rare.[9]

For the truth is that Spinoza feels that he has found a way around this problem - that there is in fact a way to say that an action is good or bad and that it is indeed possible to create conditions for soterial living. He is able to do this because of two critical concepts in his philosophy - *conatus* and the distinction he draws between the two types of necessity. *Conatus* is defined as follows

> ...*conatus* [is] the striving for self-preservation which Spinoza sees as animating all of nature.[10]

> The *conatus* of a thing is simply its effort to persist in its own being. This effort pertains to the nature of every finite mode, and in man, who is conscious of such an effort, it becomes the desire for self-preservation...Since nothing internal or intrinsic to a thing can destroy it, and since it is naturally opposed to anything taking away its existence, it can perfectly well be said that *"everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being"* (Prop.VI)...[The] description of essence fits perfectly a thing's *conatus*, and thus Spinoza can conclude: *"The endeavour, wherewith everything endeavours to persist in its own being, is nothing else but the actual essence of the thing in question"* (Prop.VII). Moreover, precisely because it constitutes the essence of the thing, this endeavor does not last for a determinate period of time, but continues for as long as the thing endures (Prop.VIII).[11]

Simply put, *conatus* is the driving force of preservation, a force that Spinoza believes all things share, a force that is

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[9] The Theological-Political Tractate, pg.166

[10] Curley, pg.87

[11] Allison, pp.125-126

intrinsic to the very essence of an entity, and this concept, when connected with Spinoza's idea of the two types of necessity, will allow Spinoza to construct an ethical and soterial theory.[12]

To see how Spinoza does this, it is first necessary to explain the distinction Spinoza draws between two ways of understanding necessity. There is necessary because of an external cause (the pool stick hits the cue ball causing it to hit the other ball etc...) and there is necessary because the nature of one's essence demands such and such (God exists necessarily because the nature of God is to exist - God is therefore necessary for Spinoza, but not determined or caused by anything else). The first type of necessary is determined by something outside the entity, and therefore the entity is merely passive, responding to the demands of the environment. The second type of necessary, however, allows for a type of freedom, for the only cause of the action is the essence of the entity itself. The entity is thus self-caused, and performs its action only because it is its nature to do so - nothing else forces it to do so. The entity is still not free in the traditional sense, for its actions are still necessary, but the cause of its actions in the second case is its own essence rather than anything external to it, so in one sense the entity is free (free from the casual effects of other

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[12] Some of the objections to the doctrine of *conatus* will be taken up at the end of the chapter.

entities - it is in exactly this sense that Spinoza refers to God as a "free" cause). By combining this idea with the idea of *conatus*, Spinoza is able to argue for a theory of human freedom and to justify the ethical and soterial life. When the human being acts in harmony with his *conatus*, the human being is "free", for his acts are self-caused, and they can be described as ethical, for they are in harmony with his essence (how this complex dynamic works will be made clear later on). As Parkinson explains

> Spinoza argues that it follows from what he has said that a man's actions, whether of mind or of body, are necessitated'. It is important to see exactly what this means. Spinoza says that a thing may be called 'necessary' in either of two ways: 'either by virtue of its essence, or by virtue of its cause'. A thing which is necessary by virtue of its essence is one whose existence 'follows necessarily from its essence or definition'; it may also be defined as that whose nature is such that it would imply a contradiction for it not to exist. A thing which is necessary by virtue of its cause is something which 'follows necessarily from a given efficient cause' - or rather...from a given *external* cause. A thing which is necessitated by an external cause, or 'determined by something else to exist and operate in a certain and determinate way' is called by Spinoza 'necessary, or rather compelled'...It now has to be seen how all this applies to human actions. It seems to be Spinoza's view that human actions are necessary in both of the ways described. He regards every human action as having an external cause; for the human being, like everything else which is 'finite and has a determinate existence' is determined to existence and to action by another cause. This means, then, that each act of a human being is 'necessary, or rather compelled'. So much is clear; but it may be wondered how a human act can be necessary in the other sense...Here the notion of *conatus* plays an important part...[there are] two types of causality in Spinoza; one of these is *conatus*, which is referred to when Spinoza says that the force by which each thing perseveres in existence follows from the eternal necessity of the nature of God. This force, then, does not come into existence because of some other finite thing; it exists because God exists and acts.

> Nor, (insofar as it is in itself) is it determined to action by some other thing. In short, insofar as an action follows from *conatus* it is necessary, but it is not determined from outside, i.e. it is not compelled...It seems then that a man's actions are necessitated in two ways - through his own conatus, and through external causes.[13]

Spinoza then goes on to say how an act motivated by *conatus* can be understood to be free. In Parkinson's words

> If '*x* is free' is taken to mean '*x* can act in some way other than that in which *x* actually does act', then it follows from what Spinoza has said that no man is free. However, Spinoza defines freedom in another way. He says: "That thing is called "free" which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to action by itself alone"...It is here, however, that the importance of the notion of *conatus* appears. It has already been noted that, insofar as an action follows from *conatus*, it is not determined by an external cause. To this must be added the fact that, for Spinoza, a mode (such as a man) is not the source of its own activities...Rather, the *conatus* with which each thing, insofar as it is itself, endeavours to persevere in its own being is really God's *conatus*. This is not something outside the mode, as another mode is; the mode is a mode of God, and its *conatus* is God's *conatus*. Hence, insofar as a man's acts follow from *conatus*, he can be properly called 'free'...what Spinoza is saying is related to the familiar point that it is one thing to assess a person's conduct in terms of the reasons for it, and another to assess it in terms of its causes. If the assessment is made in the latter way, then (according to Spinoza) there can be no question of an act's being free; every act is determined externally, and therefore it is compelled. But if a man's acts are assessed in the former way, then it may be correct to say that they are free: namely, if the reasons for the acts are good reasons, i.e. if the acts are genuinely rational. It will be noted that, for Spinoza, to be free is not something negative, in the sense that a free act is one which is not determined; rather, to be free is to be determined, but determined by the laws of one's essential humanity, which are the laws of reason.[14]

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[13] Parkinson, in Mandelbaum, pp.20-21

[14] Ibid, pg.24

Since in this sense a man can be free, and act in accordance with the dictates of reason (which follow from the *conatus*) Spinoza now possesses a framework in which to construct a theory of ethics and soteria.

Spinoza begins his theory by describing the role played by reason in expressing the *conatus* of man. As Allison explains

> The key to Spinoza's reformulation of the basic moral concepts is the undeniable fact that while all men are determined by nature to seek their own preservation and happiness, not all men are equally adept at attaining these goals. In fact, most men for Spinoza, as for Thoreau, "lead lives of quiet desperation." This is simply because they are slaves of their passions, and hence not in control of their lives (not free). We can therefore set before ourselves an ideal of life or standard of human perfection, and this will be that type of character and mode of living through which man is most in control of his life and best able to preserve his being. Such a life will be that of the "free man."[15]

This ideal of life, or standard of human perfection, can only be defined in terms of what one knows for sure to be good or bad - things that either hinder or help the *conatus*. Spinoza can thus say with perfect confidence

> By 'good' I understand here every kind of pleasure and furthermore whatever is conducive thereto, and especially whatever satisfies a longing of any sort. By 'bad' I understand every kind of pain, and especially that which frustrates a longing.[16]

and that

> It is clear from the above considerations that we do not endeavor, will, seek after or desire because we judge a thing to be good. On the contrary, we judge a thing to

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[15] Allison, pg.132

[16] The Ethics, pg.127

be good because we endeavor, will, seek after, and desire it.[17]

This means, therefore, that "both good and evil are viewed...exclusively in terms of the human *conatus*."[18] Wolfson phrases it this way

> Since self-preservation is the ultimate good at which all men aim, it is to be identified with what...is spoken of by both the multitude and persons of refinement as happiness...The ethical truism, then, that man should act in conformity with virtue really means that he should act in conformity with this conatus for self-preservation.[19]

This type of living, then, requires a slightly different understanding of the term virtue than is usually understood. For Spinoza, virtue is acting according to one's own nature, not acting in accordance with some absolute moral ideal. For Spinoza, then

> The virtuous man...is thus the man who has power over his own emotions, who is not merely a slave to his passions. Moreover, since virtuous behavior, so construed, involves, by definition, an increase in one's power of acting, such behavior is inherently and necessarily pleasurable. Virtue is therefore identical with happiness, and this enables Spinoza to affirm, in opposition to many religious ethics, that virtue is its own reward.[20]

It is possible for a man to be virtuous, even though he lacks free will, because of a power Spinoza gives reason over desire. This is not the place to go into a long explanation

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[17] Ibid, pg.110

[18] Allison, pg.133

[19] Wolfson, vol.II, pg.238

[20] Allison, pg.133

of Spinoza's theory of the passions, but in a nutshell it holds that desires can be modified and controlled by stronger desires or by adequately understanding the causes of a given desire. A stronger desire will obliterate a weaker one, while a proper understanding of the adequate causes of a desire (as opposed to the inadequate ones - this goes back to Spinoza's distinction between an adequate and an inadequate idea) will sometimes enable a person to form a new desire or to weaken the old one. A person cannot stop desiring, and nothing is sufficient to prevent the passions, but to a certain extent, they can be modified and controlled. Thus for Spinoza it is possible for a being lacking free will to live the virtuous life. As Allison explains

> The logic of Spinoza's position thus leads directly to the identification of virtue and knowledge. Only if he lives "under the dictates of reason," to use Spinoza's frequent expression, can a man control his passions, realize his true being, and achieve human perfection. The real power in human existence is therefore the power of reason, not will. Reason, to be sure, can never, for Spinoza, replace desire as the motivating force in human behavior. Man is essentially desire, and hence cannot cease desiring. He can, however, through the possession of adequate ideas, i.e., the exercise of reason, come to understand his desires and their causes, discern what is truly useful for his self-preservation, and live accordingly. He can, in short, desire rationally. The possession of adequate ideas is therefore at one and the same time *both* the ultimate goal of all human endeavor, in the sense of being that state in which man most fully realizes his essence or acts, *and* the *means* through which he can alone arrive at this goal.[21]

Because it is possible to understand virtue in this way, and because it is possible to create a vision of human life

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[21] Allison, pg.133

based on real meanings of the terms good and evil (how they relate to the *conatus*), it is therefore possible to create an ethical theory. What is ethical is that which helps a man to achieve his essence, and what is unethical is that which prevents him. At first glance, this system might justify an attitude of selfish hedonism - after all, if it feels good, and aids in self-preservation, then it should be done, regardless of its effect on others - but this is not at all what Spinoza espouses. For Spinoza holds that much of human behavior is based on inadequate ideas, and that what seems to be in concert with the *conatus* in the short run might very well be contrary to the *conatus* in the long run, which a person would understand if only they were to possess an adequate idea of the causes and effects of their behavior. Thus, there is no room for hedonism, for hedonism is the philosophy of those who possess inadequate ideas. For, if a person possessed adequate ideas, he would realize that the good of all is the good of one. As Curley says

> "If men lived according to the guidance of reason," Spinoza writes, everyone would possess his natural rights "without injury to anyone else." Civil society is necessary as an arbiter between men because men are liable to affects which are capable of overpowering reason.[22]

As far as Spinoza is concerned

> "To man...there is nothing more useful than man - nothing." The point is that man needs the help of other men if he is to realize his full intellectual potential. On the basis of this principle, Spinoza's moral theory is

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[22] Curley, pg.124

> transformed from an intellectualistic egoism into a philosophy which emphasizes the social nature of man, and which argues, on the basis of the principle of self-preservation, for the necessity of a genuine concern for the well being of others...In applying these principles to man's social relationships, Spinoza's major concern is to demonstrate that insofar as men live in harmony with reason, they live in harmony with one another, and are therefore beneficial to one another...however...insofar as men are subject to the passions, they differ from, and are not in harmony with, one another. This is because men are then determined by external things and their passions differ according to the nature of the determining objects. They are therefore at least potentially in conflict...Under the guidance of reason, however, the situation is far different. In such circumstances men's actions follow from the laws of human nature alone, not those of external objects. They thus are not in conflict with one another.[23]

The ideal society for Spinoza, then, is one that is anticompetitive.[24] Even though each person pursues his own self-interest, men living under the guidance of reason cannot come into conflict with one another.[25] Spinoza felt this was so because he considered the highest goal of human enterprise to be understanding,[26] and understanding is not a limited resource. All can gain it if they try hard enough (in principle). Thus, there is no reason for envy or competition among seekers of truth, and therefore no one who lives under the dictates of reason need be in conflict.[27]

In support of this idea, Spinoza offers three arguments.

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[23] Allison, pg.139

[24] Allison, pg.140

[25] Ibid

[26] More on this later on in the discussion of soteria.

[27] Allison, pg.140

The first two are utilitarian, and both hold that it is in the best interests of one who lives under the guidance of reason to assist others in attaining that goal. The first argument runs as follows: a person living under the guidance of reason, seeking understanding, would not molest another such person and would not feel envy or jealousy towards him, for both would understand that they are not in competition and thus the more who feel that way the better. The second argues that having a like minded person around can be helpful, for "two minds are better than one", and it is possible that one's personal quest for understanding could be assisted or enhanced by other people of similar bent.[28] The third argument is psychological, and is based on Spinoza's analysis of love. The details are not important, but essentially Spinoza holds that the more one sees others loving a given object, the more one is inclined to love that object oneself. Thus if one sees that many love and desire understanding, the more one (and everyone else) will love it also, and since understanding can be shared by all, this will serve to unify men and better society.[29] Spinoza holds that man by nature is a social animal, and thus he concludes

> So let satirists deride as much as they like the doings of mankind, let theologians revile them, and let the misanthropists heap praise on the life of rude rusticity, despising men and admiring beasts. Men will still discover from experience that they can much more

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[28] Ibid, pg.141

[29] Ibid

> easily meet their needs by mutual help and can ward off ever-threatening perils only by joining forces, not to mention that it is a much more excellent thing and worthy of our knowledge to study the deeds of men than the deeds of beasts.[30]

Spinoza has thus laid out the groundwork for his ethical theory. All that remains is for him to specify what exactly it is (in detail) that makes for the ethical life. He cannot do this however, without first specifying what he means by the soterial life, or what Spinoza refers to as blessedness. This is so because the blessed life is bound up in the ethical life. The blessed life is the goal of human existence, and only the ethical (i.e. virtuous) man can live it. Remember, for Spinoza, virtue is its own reward, and its reward is blessedness. Thus, the virtuous man is blessed, he is ethical, and because of his convictions he strives to treat others ethically and construct society in an ethical way (i.e. in a way that will maximize others' chances for blessedness). The fact that not all will be able to achieve such lofty heights and therefore might not see the need to act ethically does not contradict Spinoza's thesis, for remember that the point of society is to control men when they do not choose to act according to reason (i.e. ethically). It is enough for Spinoza that reason dictates a certain way of acting; since it does, Spinoza can set up an objective ethical theory, even if not all will be able to understand it - an ethical theory that has blessedness as its goal.

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[30] The Ethics, pg.173

Spinoza then describes what he considers to be human blessedness (soteria). It is found in, quite simply, the "intellectual love of God".[31] As Allison explains

> But what is truly useful to man? What goal does the man motivated by self-interest seek to obtain?...Spinoza's actual contention is that we desire...to *understand*...The ultimate positive thought, and therefore the ultimate remedy against the passions, is the love of God. Through this love, and this love alone, the mind is able to assume control of its emotive life and organize its bodily appetites.[32]

This love, then, gives meaning and purpose to existence, for it enables a person to fully realize his nature and live in full accordance with his essence, or *conatus*. Spinoza is then ready to offer these reflections on blessedness

> Every man's true happiness and blessedness consist solely in the enjoyment of what is good, not in the pride that he alone is enjoying it, to the exclusion of others. He who thinks himself the more blessed because he is enjoying benefits which others are not, or because he is more blessed or more fortunate than his fellows, is ignorant of true happiness and blessedness...a man's true happiness consists only in wisdom, and the knowledge of the truth...[33]

and

> "Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; nor do we enjoy it because we restrain our lusts; on the contrary, because we enjoy it, we are able to restrain them". Blessedness is something we enjoy in this life, if we live our life according to the dictates of reason, not something we hope to attain in a life to come by acting contrary to our nature in this life.[34]

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[31] Ibid, pg.147

[32] Ibid, pg.138 and 150

[33] The Theological-Political Tractate, pg.43

[34] Curley, pg.128

and finally

> "It is part of a wise man...to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another. For the human body is composed of many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole body may be equally capable of all things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things.[35]

It is obvious then, that Spinoza believes in a soterial principle, one that is bound up in and leads to his ethical concepts. As Curley sums up

> [Spinoza]...believes there is a *summum bonum*, the knowledge and love of God, which leads to true peace of mind and which is such that it can in principle be shared by many without anyone's portion thereby being diminished. In fact, I think Spinoza would say that the special importance he attaches to friendship stems from the fact that as friends share their knowledge with one another, each finds that his own knowledge is increased. To prevent misunderstanding, I should stress that when Spinoza speaks of the knowledge of God as the *summum bonum*, I take him to be understanding that phrase very broadly...Any kind of scientific understanding of any subject matter will count as knowledge of God.[36]

Spinoza, then, is able to offer his full soterial and ethical recommendations. Based on sound metaphysical principles, the virtuous life is the soterial life, and it is also the ethical life. This life is very similar to the "golden mean" (nothing to excess) of classical philosophy, and it can be said that Spinoza has merely given this old concept

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[35] Ibid, pg.125

[36] Curley, pg.125

a new grounding in a naturalistic system.[37] The free man, the ethical man, seeks understanding, he enjoys his pleasures in moderation, he treats others with dignity, fairness, and respect. He respects the laws of his society (working hard to change the bad ones) and is pleasant and fair in his dealings with others. His virtue is its own reward - as he is acting in full concert with his *conatus*, the very act of living brings him pleasure and satisfaction.

This completes then, the discussion of Spinoza's ethical and soterial system. It is certainly a magnificent edifice, and actually seems to make good sense. It has been attacked, however, on four main grounds. The first is that Spinoza's arguments are simply the logical working out of the particular nature of his own definitions. This argument has been discussed before, in the chapters on Spinoza's epistemology and God-concept. However true a modern thinker might find the criticism, Spinoza certainly didn't feel it was true, as he saw his work based on adequate ideas. The second criticism is that Spinoza's concept of *conatus* is not falsifiable and therefore not valid. After all, one could argue that suicide

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[37] Spinoza does specify "good" and "bad" emotions, and he is more than willing to say which ones the free man should strive to have, and the reasons why. These reasons range from simple utilitarianism (don't piss off the peasants, or they'll bug you) to the mutual respect that Spinoza believes is possible between two free men. Since Spinoza does not allow for free will, repentence, humility and chastity are not high on his list of "good" emotions. In the end though, Spinoza's recommendations boil down to the golden mean plus an awareness of the majesty and inevitability of it all.

proves that individuals do not possess *conatus*, as suicide is obviously counter-survival. Spinoza's response is that suicide is caused by an outside factor, and that therefore suicide is not a free behavior, but is rather a compelled behavior. Since any counter-example to the theory of *conatus* is met by Spinoza with an appeal to a heretofore unknown outside cause[38], there are those who argue that *conatus* is therefore an unfalsifiable and therefore invalid concept. This may technically be true, but it does not really detract from Spinoza's argument. In the first place, Spinoza would claim that, again, he is only expounding on an adequate idea that should be self-evident. And, in everyday experience, it certainly does seem as if the vast majority of things go on existing and struggling to exist, so it seems that there are good grounds for postulating the existence of such a force.[39] The third criticism is that "Spinoza's account of the nature of efficient causation is notoriously inadequate."[40] It seems that the work of Hume has shown some unsoundness in Spinoza's approach. Nevertheless, this is not a fatal criticism, for

What Spinoza says about human freedom is not linked

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[38] For example, if one were to say that a burning candle slowly melting out of existence represented an instance of the essence of a thing involving destruction, Spinoza would counter that an outside cause, the match that lit the wick, has caused the destruction, not the thing itself.

[39] After all, it <u>is</u> one of the basic principles of biology, at least on the species level - all things struggle to exist, reproduce, and thereby carry on the species.

[40] Parkinson, in Mandelbaum, pg.10

> inseparably with his views about the logical character of the causal relation. It is sufficient for his arguments that cause and effect shall be linked by *some* kind of necessity.[41]

The fourth criticism is that it is indeed possible to think of a situation in which rational men would be in conflict. If two men, living under the dictates of reason, were stranded in a desert with but one flask of water between them, enough for one and only one of the men to make it out alive, would not reason demand that they be in conflict? Perhaps so, but for Spinoza this would hardly invalidate the theory. Most likely, Spinoza would claim that this is a special situation, and even if it were true that reason would lead to conflict (which he would not immediately concede, for perhaps reason may lead one man to sacrifice for the other), it is certainly the case that in the ordinary world with its many threats, men fare far better when they work together. For Spinoza, even conflicts over basic, limited resources, which most people would see as "rational" conflicts, are merely examples of the conflicts created when men are slaves to their passions and possess inadequate ideas. Under the guidance of reason, Spinoza implies, some form of compromise or teamwork would always suggest itself. Like the doctrine of *conatus*, this proposition is hard to test. Also like the doctrine of *conatus*, it cannot be proven, but it has a certain appeal. After all, except when in direct competition, two people can

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[41] Ibid, pg.10

often achieve something more easily than one.

Thus all four criticisms, while valid, do not detract from the greatness or fluidity of Spinoza's work. In fact, what could be the greatest criticism of Spinoza's work is never mentioned by philosophers - that this kind of blessedness is so hard to achieve. Spinoza has succeeded in grounding an ethical and soterial theory in a thoroughly natural universe, but at the cost of making it easy to achieve. In a theistic system, all one has to do is follow the will of Deity, but in this system one has to struggle and work and ponder, and even then success is not guaranteed. This objection, however, bothered Spinoza least of all, for, as far as he was concerned, he had found the truth. As he concludes in The Ethics

> If the road I have pointed out as leading to this goal seems very difficult, yet it can be found. Indeed, what is so rarely discovered is bound to be hard. For if salvation were ready to hand and could be discovered without great toil, how could it be that it is almost universally neglected? All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.[42]

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[42] The Ethics, pg.225

Chapter 7: Kaplan on Ethics and Soteria

As a naturalist theologian, Kaplan faces the same problem that Spinoza does when it comes to justifying his theory of ethics and soteria. Since no theistic God exists, it is impossible for that God to have revealed an absolute moral code or to have provided humankind with a way of life that will guarantee soteria. Like Spinoza, however, Kaplan holds that soteria is possible for a human being and that one can indeed speak meaningfully about right and wrong - that in fact there are grounds for making moral decisions and distinctions. And, as was the case for Spinoza with respect to his God concept, the reason Kaplan holds that both are possible comes directly from Kaplan's concept of God.

In Kaplan's case however, it is even more difficult to separate God, soteria, and ethics than it is in the case of Spinoza. For Kaplan, the very function of the God idea is to guarantee the soterial life and ethical behavior[1], and his system is constructed in such a way that both soteria and ethics are inextricably bound up with one another. Without ethics, soteria is impossible, and without a concept of soteria, ethics are meaningless. Thus, in Kaplan's system, God, ethics, and soteria form three sides of a triangle, and just as a triangle without one of its sides ceases to be a triangle, so that one can no longer speak meaningfully of that

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[1] See chapter 3.

triangle, to speak of God, ethics and soteria independently of one another is to rob each concept of its full meaning, if indeed they retain any meaning at all.

To see how this interdependence works, it is necessary to review Kaplan's concept of religion and the God idea. According to Kaplan's functional analysis,

> Jewish religion is that aspect of Judaism which enables the Jew to utilize every event, act, and experience of Jewish life as a means of coming to know and worship God as the power in the universe that impels and helps him to achieve salvation, or to make the most of life.[2]

> Jewish religion will have to be based on what objective study has shown to be the function of a religion in the life of a people. That function is so to inspire and direct the energies of a people as to help its individual men and women to achieve their destiny as human beings, or to make the best use of their lives.[3]

> The function of a religion is...to enable its adherents individually to achieve salvation, or the full and the good life.[4]

and finally

> ...centrality should be accorded to the belief in, or the idea of, salvation or human fulfillment. Only authentic self-understanding can give us authentic ideas of fulfillment. Since the individual human being cannot possibly achieve fulfillment apart from some organic society, the organic society acts as an intermediary between the cosmos or nature and the individual, for those forces or processes in the latter which impel and help him to make the most of his life, of his potentialities and opportunities. Thus, it is normal for an organic society which functions as such an

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[2] Dynamic Judaism, pg.241. Kaplan also holds that this is true for other religions, but this topic will be addressed in chapter 9.

[3] Dynamic Judaism, pg.194

[4] Dynamic Judaism, pg.42

intermediary to evolve its own indigenous religion.[5]

The whole purpose of religion, according to Kaplan, is to ensure the soterial life. As was discussed in chapter 3, pure naturalism cannot even speak about soteria or ethics, for religion is beyond the purely natural. Rather, religion belongs to the transnatural, and as such it is vital to enabling a human being to realize the full and good life.

What is true for religion is also true for the God idea. The God idea guarantees that the quest for soteria and the ethical life is a real and true one, and not merely a fiction to which one subscribes out of necessity or longing. As Kaplan explains

> We must so conceive the God idea as to realize that we must be honest, that we must be responsible, that we must act justly, that we must be loyal. These are the four basic principles of ethics.[6]

> That God is the God of Israel implies that a people...should provide the principle experiences on which to base our belief in, or awareness of, God as the power that makes for salvation. Those experiences constitute the substance which should yield the values that give meaning to human life...[this] implies that the religion of a people has to find expression principally in the practice of righteousness in its political, economic, and social affairs.[7]

> This conception negates the notion that belief in God is purely subjective, that it does not affirm the existence of a cosmic process. The cosmic process of universal reciprocity outside the human mind comes to be God only when it is experienced as cosmic interdependence, and, in the human world, as moral

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[5] Dynamic Judaism, pg.77

[6] If Not Now, When?, pg.86

[7] Dynamic Judaism, pg.170

> responsibility. God's relevance to man consists in impelling him so to control and direct his strivings as to satisfy all his life needs without reversion to strife and war.
>
> The term "God" does not belong to the category of objective facts which are the subject matter of *reason* and *intelligence*. It belongs to the category of *values* which, as spiritual *factors*, are the subject matter of *wisdom*.[8]

Clearly, for Kaplan, religion and the God idea are at the heart of the soterial and ethical quest, for it is the former that make possible the latter.

But what exactly does Kaplan mean when he talks about salvation? Kaplan offers many definitions of salvation, and the best way to see what he means by the term is to see how he explains it in his various works. What follows is a representative selection of what Kaplan says about salvation:

> The salvation that the modern man seeks in this world, like that which his fathers sought in the world to come, has both a personal and a social significance. In its personal aspect it represents the faith in the possibilities of achieving an integrated personality. All those natural impulses, appetites, and desires which so often are in conflict with one another must be harmonized. They must never be permitted to issue in a stalemate, in such mutual inhibition as leaves life empty and meaningless, without zest and savor. Nor must they be permitted to issue in distraction, in a condition in which our personality is so pulled apart by conflicting desires that the man we are in certain moments or in certain relations looks with contempt and disgust at the man we are in others. When our mind functions in such a way that we feel that all our powers are actively employed in the achievement of desirable ends, we have achieved personal salvation.
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> This personal objective of human conduct cannot, however, be achieved without reference to a social objective as well. Selfish salvation is an impossibility, because no human being is psychologically self-sufficient. We are impelled by motives that relate

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[8] Dynamic Judaism, pp.82-83

themselves to the life of the race with as imperative an urge as by any that relate themselves to the preservation of our individual organism...Although to every individual the achievement of personal salvation is his supreme quest and responsibility, it is unattainable without devotion to the task of social salvation.

In its social aspect, salvation means the ultimate achievement of a social order in which all men shall collaborate in the pursuit of common ends in a manner which shall afford to each the maximum opportunity for creative self-expression. There can be no personal salvation so long as injustice and strife exist in the social order; there can be no social salvation so long as the greed for gain and the lust for domination are permitted to inhibit the hunger for human fellowship and sympathy in the hearts of men.[9]

Salvation...demands that human beings strive for world peace, ethical nationhood, and individual happiness.[10]

The right to life must therefore mean the right to have one's energies fully employed...Society, therefore, owes it to the individual, in its own interest as well as in his, to give him the opportunity for employing his powers and faculties to the full...But something more than work and ethical social relationships are needed for the complete self-realization of human personality. Man is endowed with energy far in excess of what he needs to maintain his physical existence. The joy which is associated with the healthy functioning of any vital activity makes him seek to expend this excess energy in articulating personal and social ideals, for the sake of the enhancement of life's value which such self-expression affords. This gives rise to the esthetic and religious activities of men; and the right to the pursuit of happiness implies the right to engage in these activities.[11]

[Salvation]...calls for the integration of all of life's purposes into a consistent pattern of thought and conduct.[12]

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[9] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.53-54

[10] If Not Now, When?, pg.80

[11] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.216-217

[12] Ibid, pg.172

> When, through introspection and the application of our best knowledge of human nature, we succeed in bringing our impulses into harmony with one another and with the aspirations of our fellow-men to achieve similar integration of personality for themselves, we experience a sense of fulfillment, a renewal of the zest of life, a heightening of our appreciation of life's worth and holiness...if human character is to reflect the divine, it must be integrated and self-consistent. This involves a working synthesis of individual self-expression and social cooperation.[13]

> This [Sukkot's] emphasis on rejoicing calls attention to the place that the pursuit of happiness is meant to occupy in our spiritual life, and to the importance of treating its attainment as the norm of true civilization...we may define happiness as the state of mind dominated by the feeling that life is worthwhile.[14]

> From the psychological standpoint, happiness is experienced whenever the entire personality, i.e., the human being in all his relationships, participates in the fulfillment of some specific need or needs, and there is no inner conflict of the type which might lead to the disintegration of personality. The gratification of a physical desire is attended with pleasure, but this does not mean that it results in happiness. If, for example, it takes place at the expense of the desire to be respected or held in esteem, it precludes happiness...to be grateful to God is to experience the sense of being in rapport with all the forces and relationships of life that make for the realization of its worth...It represents the highest aspiration of the human soul for experiencing the goodness or godliness of life.[15]

Several things are evident from these passages. In the first place, for Kaplan salvation is indeed equivalent to soteria, for both refer to the state of ultimate meaningful existence. In the second place, for Kaplan salvation is nearly a direct equivalent to what is referred to in modern

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[13] Ibid, pp.182-183

[14] Ibid, pg.225

[15] Ibid, pp.226-227

psychology as "self-realization". Given Kaplan's psychosocial orientation, this is not surprising. In the third place, in keeping with Kaplan's epistemology, salvation is not something that can be achieved on one's own. Rather, since human personality is inseparable from the social context in which it is formed, a social context that allows one to achieve salvation is critical. If society is so constructed that soteria is impossible, then no one person, no matter how hard he tries, can possibly achieve it. In the fourth place, soteria is impossible without a religious context and a functional concept of God. Since religion (by definition) is a way of life that allows one to achieve salvation, it is absolutely essential for soteria. The non-religious life, according to Kaplan, simply does not possess the components that would allow one to achieve salvation. Since it lacks the God idea, the non-religious life can take care of physical needs and create a functioning society on the basis of utilitarianism, but it cannot give meaning or create values for existence. In order for existence to have meaning and therefore allow for the full realization and fulfillment of human personality, the transnatural perspective must be taken, and the idea that life is good and can have meaning (in the form of the God idea) must exist. Kaplan is clear on this when he says

> [My]...position is definitely based upon a sociological conception of human behavior that differs as much from that of classical philosophy, which rests upon the assumption of the ultimate value of reflection, as

from the behavioristic assumption of B.F. Skinner that no amount of reflection can make life worth living without the right kind of conditioning environment. Underlying both, in my mind, mistaken positions is their limited understanding of human behavior as consisting of feelings which have to be brought under the control of both reason and intelligence. The mistake which is common to both of these perspectives is that they are unaware of the law of transcendence, which is that all organic entities, whether individual or collective, are more than the sum of their parts. Functions such as life, consciousness, mind, or spirit are more than the sum of the parts of the being or entity that functions and sustains them.

The following categorization of human experience might help to clarify the authentic function of religion and of the idea of God as being not that of imparting truth, or the knowledge of truth, but rather the achievement of salvation, salvation being an answer to man's needs, needs not only of an intellectual character but of a biological, social, and spiritual character...It is only in the light of that conception of the function of religion that I am attempting to reinterpret Jewish religion in terms of human nature from an organic point of view. That is, in terms of the transnatural...

The general terms in literature which correspond to these three types of experience...[needs, facts, and deeds]...are, respectively, wisdom, reason, intelligence. It is as wisdom that the idea of God is described in the Bible, not as the expression or the consequence of faith.

Reason, on the other hand, represents the relation to facts. When it comes to deeds, the problem is that of relating proper means to proper ends. That kind of experience is intelligence, intelligence being defined by John Dewey, correctly, as the proper relationship of means to ends. The concept in terms of which reason functions is nature. Facts constitute nature. Deeds imply techniques. God belongs to human needs. A god denotes any good or value that answers a need. The unique God denotes the fulfillment of *all* human needs.[16]

Without the concept of God, without the transnatural perspective, *all* human needs cannot be fulfilled, and therefore the human being cannot attain soteria.

Kaplan does not limit his discussion of salvation only to

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[16] If Not Now, When?, pp.78-79

the fulfillment of human personality. Kaplan is well aware of what Reines has called the conflict of finitude.[17] In simplified form, the conflict of finitude is the conflict the human person feels between his infinite desire and his finite limitations. Although Reines goes into many permutations of this conflict, only one aspect is important here - the desire for immortality. All human beings, according to Reines, experience a tension between the desire to live forever and the fact that they are mortal. In his book, Reines goes into the possible solutions of this problem, but for the purposes of this thesis it is enough to say that Kaplan is also aware of this conflict. Since Kaplan is a naturalist, it is evident that he will not accept in any form any type of afterlife or possibility of resurrection. For Kaplan, human beings are indeed finite, and they will die. At the same time however, mortality is not a cause for despair, for in a very real sense a human being does live forever - through the medium of the culture and values to which the individual belongs and chooses to pass on. Kaplan explains this in the following way

> The consciousness of history is the consciousness of that larger self which one shares with one's fellow men. The individual person is centuries, if not millennia, older than his chronological age. But if he also has a historical consciousness, he actually feels that the life which he lives extends far beyond the actual life of his body. Conscious of the experiences of the past, attached by a kind of umbilical cord to the history, the culture, the civilization of centuries, his being becomes coextensive with the being of his people. He enjoys, as it were, an earthly immortality.

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[17] Polydoxy, pp.59-63

> The self-consciousness of the human being...brings in its train a whole series of purposes, ideas, values, which constitute the entire character of spiritual and ethical life. Self-consciousness gives rise to the idea of moral responsibility, and to the distinction between right and wrong. In envisaging the future, it enables man to readjust himself to life in ways that would otherwise be impossible to him. Through his sense of history, man enlarges his field of operation far beyond the range of the three generations of time with which his life is usually contemporaneous. By means of this sense, human life is lived on a larger scale. It gives to the human being a dignity and significance which he could not otherwise possess.[18]

and

> A sense of common consecration to ideals inherited from a distant pass and projected into a remote future means that we have in a sense made ourselves immortal. For death cannot rob our life of significance and value to us so long as we are interested in passing on to our posterity a heritage of culture and ideals. The past before we are born and the future after our death are a part of us, and every moment is eternal that embraces them. Through our worship as part of a religious community that outlives all its members, this sense of our life's triumph over death and all manner of frustration is brought home to us. We thus experience an expansion of our personality, an enlargement of the scope of its interests and its capacities.[19]

Salvation therefore consists of two aspects: full self-realization, and the sense of immortality that comes from belonging to a culture that existed far into the past and will continue on into the future.

Having explained his doctrine of salvation, Kaplan is then ready to move on to a discussion of his ethical theory. Interestingly, despite his many fundamental differences with Spinoza, Kaplan arrives at much the same conclusions that

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[18] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.189

[19] Ibid, pp.248-249

Spinoza does using essentially the same overarching logic.[20] Although the assumptions and underpinnings of the positions of the two men are radically different, both thinkers end up relying on the principle (arrived at in two entirely different ways) that the universe, and especially humanity, are linked in an organic whole, and therefore ethics can be spoken of with meaning. For Spinoza, something is unethical if it violates the *conatus* of an individual, or hinders the *conatus* of another - for Kaplan, something is unethical if it violates another person's right to salvation.

Kaplan begins by dismissing the problem of free will. For Kaplan, the problem is not so much the question of whether free will exists or not, but that if free will does not exist it makes no sense to speak of ethics.[21] To Kaplan's way of thinking, illusion or not, people base their judgements on the notion that free will exists, and thus it is on that basis that ethics must be discussed. Kaplan can be accused of avoiding the issue here, but whatever one might think, Kaplan certainly did not feel that he was. For, as he says

> This may sound like evasion of the complicated problem of the freedom of the will. But the fact is that whether or not we succeed in proving logically or metaphysically the reality of human freedom, practically,

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[20] I mean by this that despite the fact that they do not agree on any details (theology, free will, necessity or the nature of the universe) both Spinoza and Kaplan hold the same meta-principle, namely that one can meaningfully speak of an organicity and togetherness inherent in the universe, and from this organicity can be derived basic ethical principles.

[21] Here he disagrees strongly with Spinoza.

> a just and peaceful social order is inconceivable, unless we hold the normal mature person responsible, to some extent at least, for his actions, and even for his thoughts. To accept behaviorism in its extreme form is to eliminate not only all moral values but to render the very factor of consciousness superfluous. So long as we deem consciousness an efficient cause and a factor in determining results, we inevitably imply in the case of the human being an awareness of alternatives and the power to choose between them. This is tantamount to the recognition of moral freedom and responsibility.[22]

Given his pragmatic approach, evasion or not, Kaplan's approach makes sense - pragmatically, one must allow some degree of freedom to human beings[23] or it makes no sense to talk of ethics and social improvement.

Having addressed the problem of free will, Kaplan is ready to provide the basis for his ethical theory. This basis has two major components - the nature of man in society, and God as the transnatural base for values. Kaplan begins with the assertion that human personality is sacred and that by its very nature certain rights adhere in it. Kaplan explains this in the following way

> ...the recognition of the sacredness of personality carries with it the acknowledgement of rights of personality...
>
> But is the recognition of human rights in harmony with the realities of human nature? An affirmative answer to this question is the only correct one. Man is by nature a social animal. The life-urge within him expresses itself not only in forms of behavior designed to preserve the individual organism from death, but also and equally in forms of behavior looking to the preservation of the race. Cooperation with other

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[22] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.173-174

[23] At the minimum, the freedom to change the factors that condition people to behave the way they do (if one were to take a Skinnerian position, which Kaplan does not do).

individuals is indispensable to him. Human life can be as little conceived without social cooperation as can the life of a colony of ants. On the other hand, man cannot trust to unerring instinct to guide him in his social behavior. He must therefore depend on the conscious recognition of an organic social relationship in which all men are involved, and he must see in every man an organ of a common life. The health of the social organism depends on the healthy functioning of all its organic components, that is, of all individual men. If one man oppresses another and thus thwarts the growth and creativity of his personality, he is interfering with the healthy functioning of the organism as a whole, and in this impairment the welfare of the oppressor as well is involved, although he may not realize it. Such thoughts as these are but the rationalization - if one may use that term without any connotation of wishful thinking - of the social feelings of men which are part of their instinctive endowment and indispensable equipment for life.

It is therefore absurd to assume that the only forces operative in society are those which emanate from differences in physical strength or animal cunning. To assume that there is no right but might overlooks the fact that right itself is a sort of might, an overpowering impulse to behavior in the interest of ends that transcend the life of the individual. The sacredness of personality is implicit in our recognition of the sacredness of life, which is but another way of viewing the instinct of self-preservation...

The distinction between "natural man" and "social man" is itself unnatural. Even before our common ancestors had attained in the course of their evolution the characteristics which we recognize as belonging to the *genus homo*, they doubtless lived a gregarious and quasi-social life.

...The sacredness of human rights is not to be based on the nature of man as a self-sufficient individual being, for such he certainly is not. It is to be based on the nature of man as a social being. Personality derives its being from the need of reacting to the natural and the social environment. It comes into existence in response to those tendencies and relationships that augment the unity and value of life. It is therefore a part of the divine aspect of reality, an expression of the immanence of God. This religious sanction determines the sacredness of personality and the rights that inhere in it.

Those tendencies and relationships that augment the unity and value of life, and thus point to the reality of God, are mediated for man chiefly through the organized life of society. Society is the matrix in which the very

> substance of personality is formed and nurtured. Our ideals are never derived merely from our own individual experience. The very language in which we think our most intimate thoughts is a product of social life. Whatever rights inhere in personality are at the same time integral to the very function of society. It is not that we have rights as individuals, some of which we waive by an implied social contract. We have rights, because without them we cannot maintain our responsible share of the life of human society. This gives to those rights their ethical sanction.
>
> Respect for the personalities of our fellow-men and the recognition of their rights are far better guides to ethical conduct than the appeal to the sense of duty or goodness in ourselves. It renders us more sensitive to moral wrong.[24]

and

> Social science is gradually accustoming us to regard human society not merely as an aggregate of individuals but as a physical entity, as a mind not less but more real than the mind of any of the individuals that constitute it. The perennial source of error has been the fallacy of considering the individual human mind as an entity apart from the social environment. Whatever the significance the study of mind, as detached from its social environment, may have for metaphysical inquiry, it can throw no light upon the practical problems with which the mind has to deal - problems that arise solely from the interaction of the individual with his fellows. The individual human being is as much the product of his social environment as the angle is of the sides that bound it.[25]

Perfectly consistent with his psychosocial and pragmatic approach, then, Kaplan holds that human rights inhere in the very nature of the human being - since man is a social animal, cooperation is essential for man's survival and well being, and therefore the nature of that cooperation leads one to the inevitable conclusion that every human being must have

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[24] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.212-215

[25] Dynamic Judaism, pg.43

certain, basic, unalienable rights.

Having established the basis for his ethical theory, Kaplan then goes on to establish what those rights are and how those rights are validated and upheld in everyday experience. As should be obvious from the earlier discussion of Kaplan's God concept[26], God is the essential factor in this next step. Without a functional concept of God, there is, for Kaplan, no way of validating the moral law. As he explains

> What is ordinarily called "experience" is unreliable as a means of validating the moral law. This becomes evident when we recall that in many instances men make use of "experience" to tear down the little that still survives of faith in the supremacy of ethical standards...
>
> Fortunately, something other than mere reasoning based on "experience" governs human life. Men may disagree as to what is right and wrong, but they cannot help viewing life under categories of right and wrong. Even those who say they deny the validity of the distinction between right and wrong must assume it in their conduct. They resent a "wrong" done to them and clamor for their "rights": they experience a sense of mortification if caught in a lie, regardless of whether they suffer any practical penalties in consequence or not. No one in his sense can ignore the difference between selfishness, greed and impurity, on the one hand, and justice, purity and good-will, on the other.
>
> But whence comes this distinction between moral good and moral evil?[27]

For Kaplan, the answer is a simple one - the distinction arises out of the transnatural forces that exist in the universe.

The argument Kaplan uses to make this point is identical to the one already mentioned in chapter 3 and in the above

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[26] See chapter 3.

[27] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.307-309

discussion on soteria. Because values belong to a unique category that arises out of the social and communal nature of human beings, a category that Kaplan calls the transnatural, they cannot be talked about in the same way as ordinary everyday facts. Nevertheless, they are real, and they are represented by the God idea a religion has. By concretizing these values in the God idea, a society gives these values a power that they would not possess in a merely utilitarian scheme. As Kaplan puts it "God is not merely a fact; God is a factor. God creates facts".[28] What he means by this is that the values a society holds, once they have become part of the God idea, become one of the forces that help to shape that society's members. The values embodied in the God idea become a part of the personality of the members of the society, and therefore shape the way that members of the society think and feel.[29] This makes religion a critical force in a society, for only religion directly addresses the transnatural domain. An evil religion creates an evil society and evil people, while a good religion achieves its opposite. This, for Kaplan, is the whole purpose of reconstructionism - to take (Jewish) religion and construct it so that it creates a good society and good people. As he says

> That religion is as inevitable a part of human civilization as is science or art derives from the fact

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[28] If Not Now, When?, pg.20

[29] Not surprisingly, this approach is perfectly consistent with Kaplan's epistemological approach.

> that, with the progress of civilization, religion ceases to be utilitarian and becomes ethical. This change of function is Judaism's contribution to the spiritual life of mankind. Jewish religion has taught the world that the business of religion is not to help us secure the things we need for our well-being, but to get us to use those things righteously once we have secured them. It is undoubtedly much more difficult to know how to utilize, than how to retain, our health. A far greater amount of effort is involved in the righteous use of power and influence than in winning them.[30]

and

> The validity and efficaciousness of the religio-humanist approach to questions of faith is confirmed for me by the fact that fundamentally the only logical basis for ethical conduct is religion and its idea of God.[31]

Kaplan then goes on to cite Durkheim and repeat the sociological argument that religion is a function of the collective consciousness in a society, and that as such it has real power and influence over how the minds and personalities of the members of that society develop.

All that remains is for Kaplan to provide the criterion that will be used to determine what is good and what is bad. As far as Kaplan is concerned, the criterion is already inherent in his definition of salvation. Since the goal of human existence is to achieve salvation, whatever moral code helps a person to achieve salvation is good, and whatever moral code hinders salvation is bad. This definition seems as if it is wide open, and that almost anything goes, but Kaplan places definite limits on what can be considered moral.

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[30] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.197

[31] If Not Now, When?, pg.56

In the first place, Kaplan begins with the emotional intuition that the above is indeed the case. As he says

> ...this interpretation [the purely humanistic one] is inadequate, because it fails to express and to foster the feeling that man's ethical aspirations are part of a cosmic urge, by obeying which man makes himself at home in the universe. Without the emotional intuition of an inner harmony between human nature and universal nature, without the conviction, born of the heart rather than the mind, that the world contains all that is necessary for human salvation, the assumptions necessary for ethical living remain cold hypotheses lacking all dynamic power.[32]

Emotional intuition also gives rise to the other great principle Kaplan uses in his ethical theory, namely that "*freedom is at the very root of man's spiritual life, and is the prime condition of his self-fulfillment, or salvation.*"[33] At the root of things, these principles form the basis of Kaplan's ethics, but at the same time it is important to remember that for Kaplan these are not purely emotional intuitions, for they also come out of his view of society. If society is indeed an organic whole (which, for Kaplan, social science makes evident) then it is indeed true tnat all members of a society are equal and that there are no grounds whatsoever for sacrificing the salvation of one person for the salvation of another. Since all are equal, society and ethics must be constructed so that all have an equal chance to achieve salvation. This does not mean that all must be robots that do or say the same thing. As Kaplan puts it

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[32] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.245

[33] Ibid, pg.271

> *The doctrine of equality does not imply that all men must have identical opportunities for education, employment and esthetic and religious expression, but that all have an equal claim to the opportunity to pursue these activities to the limits of their own varying capacities and in accordance with their own individual interests.*[34]

At the root of ethics, then, is freedom, but the freedom of one person ends when the freedom of another person is infringed, or when the free act of an individual violates another person's right to salvation, or self-realization.

There is yet one more check that Kaplan places on his ethical theory - the check of tradition. Given Kaplan's evolutionary viewpoint, it is a given that new ideas arise out of old ones - that tradition forms the mold in which new ideas are formed. Thus, in the realm of ethics, tradition forms a starting point from which ethical ideas evolve and develop. What was ethical in one age may no longer be ethical in another age when greater understanding and knowledge has been achieved. At the same time, tradition is indispensable, as it represents the collective effort of centuries and as such represents a reservoir of thought that no mere individual could hope to reproduce on his or her own. Kaplan explains his view in the following way

> Tradition is indispensable to the life of the social organism. Were it not for tradition each generation would have to repeat the experiences of the past, and would not be able to avail itself of the useful habits accumulated through the ages, or to transmit the benefits of its own experience to posterity. But when tradition becomes so clamorous as to refuse to recognize change or

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[34] Ibid, pg.217

> to admit the need of innovation to meet changed conditions, it can only stifle and frustrate the life of society. It then becomes sin.[35]

and furthermore that

> ...these customs, laws, standards, and conventions originated, at the time of their origin, in response to the needs of that society...But when the traditional culture pattern does not contribute to the welfare of the society and its component individuals, the mind must be free to alter and reconstruct the traditional culture pattern, to seek the development of new and better social habits to meet the changed situation.[36]

So tradition is important, as it forms the basis for ethical consideration, but it is not automatically correct and does not need to be blindly followed. Reason, the current social situation, and tradition all interact to form the ethical ideas of any given age.

This process is not foolproof, however. It is entirely possible that mistakes can be made in determining what is right and what is wrong. As Kaplan puts it, "We learn the moral law as we learn natural law, by trial and error."[37] This may seem as if Kaplan is throwing open the whole field of ethics to chaos, but it is important to remember that for Kaplan there is an objective standard by which to measure the morality of a given attitude. That standard is to be found by examining the spirit in which an ethical decision is made. If the decision is in accord with what Kaplan considers to be the

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[35] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.171-172

[36] Dynamic Judaism, pg.178

[37] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.312

fundamental right of all humans to achieve soteria, then it can be considered a good decision, even if a later age will decide that it was immoral and needs to be further modified. Kaplan provides a fascinating example of this view when he defends the institution of slavery in the ancient world. His defense consists of basically two parts. In the first place, because of the level of technology in the ancient world, without slavery, philosophy, science, art, etc..., could never have been developed. His reasoning is that these intellectual disciplines require leisure time, and a society that had to devote all its energies to mere survival would not have had the time to develop intellectual disciplines. By utilizing slaves, societies freed up others to think, and this allowed societies and cultures to develop to the point of realizing that slavery was wrong. The second reason is that in the context of the ancient world, a conqueror had only two options from which to choose when dealing with a conquered people. He could exterminate the conquered people, or he could enslave them. From Kaplan's point of view, enslavement is clearly the lesser of two evils, and therefore, from this limited viewpoint, slavery is clearly more moral than its alternative. Once societies had advanced beyond the subsistence level, however, slavery can be clearly viewed as wrong, for it violates each person's right to freedom and self-realization. Thus slavery, even though it is wrong, was a necessary evolutionary step on the way to developing the moral law, and

as such it was a necessary evil that mitigates against its outright condemnation (in the ancient world), subject of course to a proper understanding of its place in the evolutionary view of the development of humankind.[38] Thus, ethics are relative, but they always have the same goal - to help humans realize their inherent right to soteria.

This position also allows Kaplan to condemn such institutions as Nazi Germany, always a problem for ethical relativists. If ethics are relative, how can one objectively state that genocide is evil? After all, from the Nazi point of view they were engaged in a holy quest to purify the human species. To the Nazis, their actions were not genocide, any more than a person would consider ingesting an antibiotic that kills millions of bacteria to be genocide. From the Nazi point of view, they were merely removing a disease from humanity, an unpleasant task that somebody had to do.

Kaplan, of course, has no patience with the Nazi point of view, for to him, it contains two flawed assumptions that invalidate Nazi ideology. In the first place, no human has the right to consider another human inferior - such a position violates Kaplan's fundamental ethical assumption. In the second place, Nazi ideology did not contribute even to German salvation, as it involved a serious maladjustment to the world, and violated the organicity of humanity. Kaplan

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[38] See The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pp.276-278

expresses these ideas in the following way

> Our purpose in reinterpreting traditional values should be to retain and emphasize those elements in them which are compatible with our own highest ethical standards. Among those ethical standards, to which any traditional value must necessarily conform if it is to continue functioning in our lives, is that conception of human worth and individual dignity which regards as immoral any classification of human beings into superior and inferior.[39]

and

> The German people may be grateful to their Aryan god for the courage and valor to fight Germany's enemies with which his worship inspires them, but they cannot attain happiness through such worship, since it involves a maladjustment of Germany to the rest of the world.[40]

Clearly Kaplan feels that he has legitimate grounds for condemning the Nazis, and by extension, any genocide.

All that remains now is an evaluation of Kaplan's theory of soteria and ethics. Such an evaluation is difficult, however, for, like all such systems, Kaplan relies on a few fundamental assumptions. For Kaplan, these are self-evident propositions, propositions that any thinking person would accept as self-evidently true. If one agrees with Kaplan, and accepts his propositions, then Kaplan's theories make good sense, can be considered true, and provide excellent justification for the belief in the possibility of soteria and for the reality of ethics. If one disagrees with Kaplan's assumptions, one can simply say that Kaplan has constructed a nice theory, but that it is untrue and is merely a subjective

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[39] Dynamic Judaism, pg.192

[40] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.226

system, where Kaplan's personal likes and dislikes determine what is possible and what is not, and what is good and what is bad. Despite this obvious criticism, which cannot really be subjected to reason (a self-evident proposition can't be argued - that's why its self-evident) it does seem that Kaplan has made some telling points. There are no rational grounds for determining why some humans should have greater rights and privileges than others, so it does make sense to assume that all humans are equal. While this equality may not guarantee the right to freedom as Kaplan would have it, it does seem to guarantee the right to equal treatment, so that postulating a right to freedom makes some amount of sense. After all, on the purely utilitarian level, might may indeed make right, but all this does is guarantee the equal right of every individual to constantly be at war. If one can choose what right comes out of the doctrine of equality, it seems to be in everyone's best interest to choose freedom over war. After all, with freedom, each individual has a much better chance at a happy, long, fulfilling life.

It also seems that there is some truth to Kaplan's assertion that overall, humans have become more ethical with time. Despite some huge setbacks in the twentieth century, there is still a focus on human rights in the modern world that never existed before. The notion of human rights is a factor in international and national decisions now, more so than it ever used to be. So Kaplan, even if not entirely

correct, is pointing to an evolutionary phenomenon in human development.[41]

And finally, it seems that there is much to be said for Kaplan's sociological analysis. There are those who find social science to be invalid, but as was mentioned in an earlier chapter, there are many scholars who find it valid. Humans do need to work together to survive, and it does seem as if a certain amount of cooperation is wired into us on the instinctual level (much like a pack of wolves). Humans are social animals, so it seems that Kaplan is not without justification in assuming that certain rules of cooperative behavior are a necessary part of the human organism.[42] These rules may not lead fully to the ethical conclusions Kaplan wants to reach, but at the same time, he has a valid point that is worthy of consideration. And as far as soteria goes, one cannot with certainty say that all humans have a right or the ability to achieve it, but considering the efforts throughout the ages to achieve meaningful existence (religion, philosophy, psychology) it seems again that Kaplan has hit on a fundamental need.[43] Also, while one may disagree with Kaplan's emphasis on the role of God in the achievement of

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[41] Again, this is a matter of opinion, but it seems to me that an organization such as the U.N. or Amnesty International could never have existed 300 years ago (or even 200). Kaplan may not be entirely correct, but it seems to me that he is on to *something*.

[42] Spinoza, although he conceived of it in a different manner, essentially felt the same way.

[43] A need that countless thinkers have agreed exists.

soteria, at a basic level it does make sense that one has to believe that soteria is possible in order to achieve it. Kaplan may choose to call this belief God while others choose to call it something else, but Kaplan is not wrong to stress the importance of this belief.

So, even though Kaplan's system has its subjective aspects, it also possess aspects that seem well grounded in human nature and experience. One does not have to agree with all of it to see that Kaplan has made some significant points worthy of consideration, points that give meaning and value to life in a world with no theistic God - the primary challenge of any naturalist theologian.

Chapter 8: Spinoza on the Bible, Chosenness, and Ritual

As should be evident by now, a naturalist theologian must also take quite a different tack from a theistic theologian when it comes to explaining the role of the Bible and the doctrines it teaches. Since for a naturalist there is no theistic God who has communicated with humankind, it is self-evident that the Bible cannot be taken at face value. If the Bible is to retain any significance whatsoever in a naturalist system, the naturalist theologian is faced with the challenge of explaining how this can be so without recourse to a supernatural Deity. Both Spinoza and Kaplan were aware of this challenge, and both provide explanations of how the Bible and its doctrines should be viewed. Not surprisingly, as with their views on soteria and ethics, their conclusions come directly out of the epistemology and God concept that each thinker adheres to.

Spinoza begins his discussion of the Bible by explaining the proper context in which the Bible should be viewed. In many ways, Spinoza can be considered the first true Biblical critic, a man very much ahead of his time, for Spinoza begins with the conviction that the Bible must be studied on its own merits, in a scientific manner, without resorting to the use of superstition or dogma. As he explains

> Ambition and unscrupulousness have waxed so powerful, that religion is thought to consist, not so much in respecting the writings of the Holy Ghost, as in defending human commentaries, so that religion is no

longer identified with charity, but with spreading discord and propagating insensate hatred disguised under the name of zeal for the Lord, and eager ardour.

To these evils we must add superstition, which teaches men to despise reason and nature, and only to admire and venerate that which is repugnant to both: whence it is not wonderful that for the sake of increasing the admiration and veneration felt for Scripture, men strive to explain it so as to make it appear to contradict, as far as possible, both one and the other: thus they dream that most profound mysteries lie hid in the Bible, and weary themselves out in the investigation of these absurdities, to the neglect of what is useful...

I may sum up the matter by saying that the method of interpreting Scripture does not widely differ from the method of interpreting nature - in fact, it is almost the same. For as the interpretation of nature consists in the examination of the history of nature, and therefrom deducing definitions of natural phenomena on certain fixed axioms, so Scriptural interpretation proceeds by the examination of Scripture, and inferring the intention of its authors as a legitimate conclusion from its fundamental principles. By working in this manner everyone will always advance without danger of error - that is, if they admit no principles for interpreting Scripture, and discussing its contents save such as they find in Scripture itself - and will be able with equal security to discuss what surpasses our understanding, and what is known by the natural light of reason.[1]

Spinoza then goes on to enumerate the three principles that form the basis of his analysis of Scripture, principles that any modern day Biblical scholar also adheres to. They are as follows

The history of a Scriptural statement comprises -

I. The nature and properties of the language in which the books were written, and in which their authors were accustomed to speak. We shall thus be able to investigate every expression by comparison with common conversational usages...therefore, a knowledge of the Hebrew language is before all things necessary...

II. An analysis of each book and arrangement of its contents under heads; so that we may have at hand the various texts which treat of a given subject. Lastly, a

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[1] The Theological-Political Tractate, pp.98-100

> note of all the passages which are ambiguous or obscure, or which seem mutually contradictory...
>
> III. Lastly, such a history should relate the environment of all the prophetic books extant; that is, the life, the conduct, and the studies of the author of each book, who he was, what was the occasion, and the epoch of his writing, whom did he write for, and in what language. Further, it should inquire into the fate of each book: How it was first received, into whose hands it fell, how many different versions there were of it, by whose advice was it received into the Bible, and, lastly, how all the books now universally accepted as sacred, were united into a single whole.[2]

Using this approach, Spinoza is able to conclude a great many things, foremost among them that "the history of the Bible is not so much imperfect as untrustworthy: the foundations are not only too scanty for building upon, but are also unsound"[3] and that "the sacred books were not written by one man, nor for the people of a single period, but by many authors of different temperaments, at times extending from first to last over nearly two thousand years, and perhaps much longer."[4] Clearly then, the Bible for Spinoza is not what it claims to be at face value, but rather something else.

That something else makes up the body of the Theological-Political Tractate. Spinoza begins his discussion of the Bible by examining the nature of prophecy and prophets, and concludes that it is only in regard to their moral teachings that a prophet is authoritative. Spinoza's logic is simple. In the first place, a prophet does in fact present Divine

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[2] Ibid, pp.101-103

[3] Ibid, pg.120

[4] Ibid, pg.182

revelation. This occurs because the prophet, insofar as he has a human mind, takes part in the attribute of thought of God. As he says

> Seeing then that our mind subjectively contains in itself and partakes of the nature of God, and solely from this cause is enabled to form notions explaining natural phenomena and inculcating morality, it follows that we may rightly assert the nature of the human mind (in so far as it is thus conceived) to be a primary cause of Divine revelation. All that we clearly and distinctly understand is dictated to us, as I have just pointed out, by the idea and nature of God; not indeed through words, but in a way far more excellent and agreeing perfectly with the nature of the mind...[5]

This revelation, however, is available to anyone who knows the true philosophy. Thus, insofar as the prophets said things in accordance with the true religion and the true concept of God[6], they represent true revelation. However, since in order to make their revelations understandable the prophets had to use their imaginations[7], much of what a prophet says can be ignored or discarded.[8] Spinoza goes through a series of elaborate proofs to show why this must be so, citing various Biblical passages, but the main point in his argument is the wide disparity among the accounts given by different prophets. As Spinoza explains it

> It [prophecy] varied according to disposition in this way: if a prophet was cheerful, victories, peace, and events which make men glad were revealed to him; in

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[5] Ibid, pg.14

[6] More on both of these later.

[7] The Theological-Political Tractate, pg.25

[8] Ibid, pg.27

> that he was naturally more likely to imagine such things. If, on the contrary, he was melancholy, wars, massacres, and calamities were revealed; and so, according as a prophet was merciful, gentle, quick to anger, or severe, he was more fitted for one kind of revelation than another. It varied according to the temper of imagination in this way: if a prophet was cultivated he perceived the mind of God in a cultivated way, if he was confused he perceived it confusedly. And so with revelations perceived through visions. If a prophet was a countryman he saw visions of oxen, cows, and the like; if he was a soldier, he saw generals and armies; if a courtier, a royal throne, and so on...
>
> The style of prophecy also varied according to the eloquence of the individual prophet. The prophecies of Ezekiel and Amos are not written in a cultivated style like those of Isaiah and Nahum, but more rudely...
> A due consideration of these passages will clearly show us that God has no particular style in speaking, but, according to the learning and capacity of the prophet, is cultivated, compressed, severe, untutored, prolix, or obscure...
>
> ...Isaiah saw seraphim with six wings, Ezekiel beasts with four wings; Isaiah saw God clothed and sitting on a royal throne, Ezekiel saw Him in the likeness of a fire; each doubtless saw God under the form in which he usually imagined Him.[9]

Since the above is true, it is easy for Spinoza to conclude that

> ...we are only bound to believe in the prophetic writings, the object and substance of the revelation; with regard to the details, every one may believe or not, as he likes.[10]

Having undermined the basis of prophecy, at least as far as its literal truth is concerned, Spinoza then goes on to give a similar treatment to the miracles recorded in scripture. Again, Spinoza concludes that the accounts of miracles in the Bible are not accurate, at least insofar as the causes the Bible ascribes to them. Given Spinoza's

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[9] Ibid, pp.30-32

[10] Ibid, pp.40-41

description of God, miracles are clearly impossible, since Spinoza's God cannot in any way work miracles. However, since the Theological-Political Tractate attempts to argue with theologians on their own ground, Spinoza argues that from the Bible itself it can be shown that God does not work miracles. This is due to the fact that a miracle involves a logical contradiction, even on the Bible's own terms. Thus, Spinoza concludes, the best way to understand a miracle is to assume that the event occured, but that the chronicler of said event possessed an inadequate understanding as to why, and therefore attributed the event to the workings of a supernatural Deity. Spinoza makes this clear when he says

> Now, as nothing is necessarily true save only by divine decree, it is plain that the universal laws of nature are decrees of God following from the necessity and perfection of the Divine nature. Hence, any event happening in nature which contravened nature's universal laws, would necessarily also contravene the Divine decree, nature and understanding; or if anyone asserted that God acts in contravention to the laws of nature, he, *ipso facto*, would be compelled to assert that God acted against His own nature - an evident absurdity...Nor is there any sound reason for limiting the power and efficacy of nature, and asserting that her laws are fit for certain purposes, but not for all; for as the efficacy and power of nature, are the very efficacy and power of God, and as the laws and rules of nature are the decrees of God, it is in every way to be believed that the power of nature is infinite, and that her laws are broad enough to embrace everything conceived by the Divine intellect; the only alternative is to assert that God has created nature so weak, and has ordained for her laws so barren, that he is repeatedly compelled to come afresh to her aid if He wishes that she should be preserved, and that things should happen as He desires: a conclusion, in my opinion, very far removed from reason...it most clearly follows that miracles are only intelligible as in relation to human opinions, and merely mean events of which the natural cause cannot be explained by a reference to any ordinary occurrence,

either by us, or at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle.[11]

Furthermore, contrary to the usual arguments of theologians, for Spinoza, the existence of miracles weakens the case for God's existence as opposed to strengthening it. Since a miracle is outside human understanding or experience, if miracles were to really exist they would invalidate all foundations for human knowledge. If we cannot trust even what we think we know (the laws of nature) how can we trust anything that our minds can come up with? Spinoza explains it this way

> Therefore miracles, in the sense of events contrary to the laws of nature, so far from demonstrating to us the existence of God, would, on the contrary, lead us to doubt it, where, otherwise, we might have been absolutely certain of it, as knowing that nature follows a fixed and immutable order...
>
> If therefore, anything should come to pass in nature which does not follow from her laws, it would also be in contravention to the order which God has established in nature for ever through universal laws: it would, therefore, be in contravention to God's nature and laws, and, consequently, belief in it would throw doubt upon everything, and lead to Atheism.[12]

Since miracles involve so many contradictions, it is easy, as was the case for prophecy, for Spinoza to conclude that

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[11] Ibid, pp.83-84

[12] Ibid, pp.85-87. It should be noted that Spinoza is playing a little fast and loose here. For one who takes the Bible absolutely literally, the Bible is Truth, as it is the revelation from an infallible Deity. There is no problem of the foundation of knowledge for a believer - the foundation of knowledge is the revealed word of God. However, Spinoza does have a point that a logical inconsistency exists in the concept of miracles. If God is all powerful, all knowing, and all good, then why is a miracle ever necessary? A perfect God should not have to resort to miracles - if God is in perfect control, why resort to miracles?

> ...when Scripture describes an event as accomplished by God or God's will, we must understand merely that it was in accordance with the law and order of nature, not, as most people believe, that nature had for a season ceased to act, or that her order was temporarily interrupted.[13]

Now that he has dismissed the special nature of prophecy and miracles, Spinoza is ready to move on to the question of the chosenness of the Jews. As far as Spinoza is concerned, this doctrine also involves a series of logical contradictions. In the first place, the doctrine of chosenness implies that only the Jews can achieve blessedness, something that was anathema to Spinoza.[14] As Spinoza understands the scriptural doctrine of chosenness

> ...it speaks only according to the understanding of its hearers, who...knew not true blessedness. For in good sooth they would have been no less blessed if God had called all men equally to salvation, nor would God have been less present to them for being equally present to others; their laws would have been no less just if they had been ordained for all, and they themselves would have been no less wise. The miracles would have shown God's power no less by being wrought for other nations also; lastly, the Hebrews would have been just as much bound to worship God if He had bestowed all these gifts equally on all men.[15]

To believe otherwise, he argues, would be to "...indulge the dream that nature formerly created men of different kinds."[16]

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[13] Ibid, pg.89

[14] See chapter 6.

[15] Ibid, pp.43-44. Spinoza bases his conclusions here on his concept of God, but it also holds true for the theistic God - certainly an all powerful, omnipresent Deity would have enough power and salvation to go around.

[16] Ibid, pp.45-46

But Scripture does state that the Jews are chosen, and Spinoza, as was the case with prophecy and miracles, is not willing to dismiss Scripture out of hand. How then is the doctrine of chosenness presented therein to be understood?

Spinoza begins to explain this doctrine by pointing out that the thing that sets nations apart from one another is their respective social systems. For Spinoza, the goal of a social system is to guarantee the health and security of its members, allowing those who are capable to achieve the state of blessedness.[17] Reason and experience teach that the most certain way to achieve this is to set up a society with "fixed laws, the occupation of a strip of territory, and the concentration of all forces...into one body...the social body."[18] Since this is the case for Spinoza, he can say with perfect confidence that

> Nations, then, are distinguished from one another in respect to the social organization and the laws under which they are governed; the Hebrew nation was not chosen by God in respect to its wisdom nor its tranquility of mind, but in respect to its social organization and the good fortune with which it obtained supremacy and kept it so many years...Even a cursory perusal [of Scripture] will show us that the only respects in which the Hebrews surpassed other nations, are in their successful conduct of matters relating to government, and in their surmounting great perils solely by God's external aid; in other ways they were on a par with their fellows, and God was equally gracious to all. For in respect to intellect they held very ordinary ideas about God and nature, so that they cannot have been God's chosen in this respect; nor were they so chosen in respect of virtue and the true life, for here again they, with the exception of a very

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[17] Ibid, pg.46

[18] Ibid, pg.46

> few elect, were on an equality with other nations: therefore their choice and vocation consisted only in the temporal happiness and advantages of independent rule. In fact, we do not see that God promised anything beyond this to the patriarchs or their successors; in the law no other reward is offered for obedience than the continual happiness of an independent commonwealth and other goods of this life; while, on the other hand, against contumacy and the breaking of the covenant is ..threatened the downfall of the commonwealth and great hardships...Thus, the only reward which could be promised to the Hebrews for continued obedience to the law was security and its attendant advantages, while no surer punishment could be threatened for disobedience, than the ruin of the state and the evils which generally follow therefrom...We conclude therefore (inasmuch as God is to all men equally gracious, and the Hebrews were only chosen by Him in respect to their social organization and government), that the individual Jew, taken apart from his social organization and government, possessed no gift of God above other men, and that there was no difference between Jew and Gentile.[19]

Thus the Jews were only chosen in regard to their particular social structure and its laws, which were superior to the social systems around it.

Spinoza then goes on to the question of whether the Jews' election was temporal or eternal. Based on his own understanding of theology, Spinoza obviously feels that the Jews' election was temporal, but he attempts to base his argument on Scripture.[20] He quotes several passages[21] to show how the prophets warned that improper behavior would cause the destruction of the commonwealth and the end of the

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[19] Ibid, pp.46-49

[20] Ibid, pg.54. Remember, one of the goals of the Theological-Political Tractate is to argue on theistic theologians own terms.

[21] Jeremiah 31:36, Ezekiel 20:32, Leviticus 18:27, Zephaniah 3:12-13

"specialness" of the Jews.[22] He therefore concludes that

> At the present time, therefore, there is absolutely nothing which the Jews can arrogate to themselves beyond other people.[23]

The Jews, therefore, were chosen, but only in a very specific sense and only for a specific period of time - in terms of their social structure and particular laws while their commonwealth lasted.

Given Spinoza's analysis of the election of the Jews, the tack that he will take towards explaining the status of the ritual law should be fairly obvious. In the first place, consistent with his theology, there is no way that God actually spoke to Moses and ordered him to institute the ceremonial law. Rather, Moses was a prophet, and as such Moses played two roles - to teach the Divine law[24] and to teach proper laws for right living. These latter laws, however, are temporal, and have nothing to do with God - rather, they have to do with insuring public security and well

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[22] The Theological-Political Tractate, pp.54-55

[23] Ibid, pg.55. It should be noted that Spinoza is guilty here of the same thing he accuses theistic theologians of - of arguing over interpretation of the text. Many parts of the Bible (Genesis 17 and Deuteronomy 29 to name just two) seem to make it pretty clear that the covenant is an eternal one. The real reason Spinoza feels that the election of the Jews is temporal and bound only to their social system is that it is inconsistent with his theology for it to be otherwise, but since he's trying to use the other side's own ammunition, he is forced into his own version of personal interpretation. Its not so much that he is incorrect, but that there are other Biblical passages that mitigate against what he is saying, and he conveniently ignores those.

[24] This subject will be taken up below.

being.

Spinoza begins his discourse by pointing out that the Jews must have had special laws, because it is exactly because of these special laws that the Jews can be considered to be chosen by God.[25] The purpose of ceremonies then, is not to teach the Divine law, but to provide for an orderly society. Moses, as lawgiver, realized the necessity of having laws, and therefore ordained them, but he put them in the guise of religious doctrine so that the masses would follow them, since the masses cannot be trusted to reason out the basis of ethics and right conduct like the true philosopher can.[26] As he did with prophecy, miracles and chosenness, Spinoza attempts to prove his conclusions from Scripture, but once again his conclusions really come out of his own theology. Spinoza explains his logic in the following manner

> We may also learn from the Bible that ceremonies are no valid aid to blessedness, but only have reference to the temporal prosperity of the kingdom; for the rewards promised for their observance are merely temporal advantages and delights, blessedness being reserved for the universal Divine law. In all the five books commonly attributed to Moses nothing is promised, as I have said, beyond temporal benefits...Though many moral precepts besides ceremonies are contained in these five books, they appear not as moral doctrines universal to all men, but as commands especially adapted to the understanding and character of the Hebrew people, and as having reference only to the welfare of the kingdom. For instance, Moses does not teach the Jews as a prophet not to kill or steal, but gives these commandments solely as lawgiver and judge; he does not reason out doctrine, but affixes for its non-observance a penalty which may

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[25] The Theological-Political Tractate, pg.47

[26] See chapter 6.

and very properly does vary in different nations.[27]

If the above is indeed true, why then does the ceremonial law contain so many rituals and holidays that do not seem to be intimately connected to statecraft? Spinoza provides two answers to this question: to inculcate piety and to control the masses. Spinoza explains the first with regard to the patriarchs

> As to the fact that the patriarchs offered sacrifices, I think they did so for the purpose of stimulating their piety, for their minds had been accustomed from childhood to the idea of sacrifice...and thus they found in sacrifice their most powerful incentive.
>
> The patriarchs, then, did not sacrifice to God at the bidding of a Divine right, or as taught by the basis of the Divine law, but simply in accordance with the custom of the time...[28]

In other words, rituals have a psychological value, and help to make concrete for people abstract ideas that they might have. And, in the case of those who are not capable of forming abstract ideas, ritual serves an even more critical function. As Spinoza begins his exposition

> The formation of society serves not only for defensive purposes, but is also very useful, and, indeed, absolutely necessary, as rendering possible the division of labor. If men did not render mutual assistance to each other, no one would have either the skill or the time to provide for his own sustenance and preservation: for all men are not equally apt for all work, and no one would be capable of preparing all that he individually stood in need of...[29]

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[27] The Theological-Political Tractate, pg.70

[28] Ibid, pp.72-73

[29] Note the similarity to Kaplan's view of the importance of society.

> Now if men were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what is designated by true reason, society would obviously have no need of laws: it would be sufficient to inculcate true moral doctrines; and men would freely, without hesitation, act in accordance with their true interests. But human nature is framed in a different fashion: every one, indeed, seeks his own interest, but does not do so in accordance with the dictates of sound reason, for most men's ideas of desirability and usefulness are guided by their fleshly instincts and emotions, which take no thought beyond the present and the immediate object. Therefore, no society can exist without government, and force, and laws to restrain and repress men's desires and immoderate impulses...He [Moses] then, by the Divine virtue he possessed, made laws and ordained them for the people, taking the greatest care that they would be obeyed willingly and not through fear...Moses, therefore, by his virtue and the Divine command, introduced a religion, so that the people might do their duty from devotion rather than fear. Further, he bound them over by benefits, and prophesied many advantages in the future; nor were his laws very severe, as anyone may see for himself, especially if he remarks the number of circumstances necessary in order to procure the conviction of an accused person...Lastly...he left nothing to the free choice of individuals; the people could do nothing but remember the law, and follow the ordinances laid down at the good pleasure of their ruler...
>
> This, then, was the object of the ceremonial law, that men should do nothing of their own free will, but should always act under external authority, and should continually confess by their actions and thoughts that they were not their own masters, but were entirely under the control of others.[30]

The reason Moses had to resort to religion is the following

> ...the deduction of conclusions from general truths *a priori*, usually requires a long chain of arguments, and, moreover, very great caution, acuteness, and self-restraint - qualities which are not often met with; therefore people prefer to be taught by experience rather than deduce their conclusion from a few axioms, and set them out in logical order. Whence it follows, that if anyone wishes to teach a doctrine to a whole nation (not to speak of the whole human race), and to be understood by all men in every particular, he will seek to support his teaching with experience, and will endeavour to suit

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[30] The Theological-Political Tractate, pp.73-76

> his reasonings and the definitions of his doctrines as far as possible to the understanding of the common people, who form the majority of mankind...Otherwise he writes only for the learned - that is, he will be understood by only a small proportion of the human race.
>
> All Scripture was written primarily for an entire people, and secondarily for the whole human race; therefore its contents must necessarily be adapted as far as possible to the understanding of the masses, and proved only by examples drawn from experience...
>
> It is now, I think, sufficiently clear what persons are bound to believe in the scripture narratives, and in what degree they are so bound, for it evidently follows...that the knowledge of and belief in them is particularly necessary to the masses whose intellect is not capable of perceiving things clearly and distinctly.[31]

Because of the above, Scripture is useful as far as it goes, but two critical points must be remembered. The first is that since Scripture is directed toward the masses, and its primary purpose is obedience and not knowledge, it does not really matter whether one accepts the doctrine or not. What really matters is obedience to the Divine law (see below), and it doesn't really matter how one comes to that obedience. For some it will be through reason, for others through Scripture, but the effect, not the cause, is what matters.[32] The second is that since the ceremonial law's only purpose was to create and maintain the Jewish commonwealth, the destruction of the commonwealth has rendered the ceremonial law invalid. Spinoza is clear on this when he says

> ...therefore they [the ceremonial laws] were only

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[31] Ibid, pp.77-78

[32] Ibid, pg.79

valid while that kingdom lasted.[33]

and

> ...the Jews themselves were not bound to practise their ceremonial observances after the destruction of their kingdom...[34]

It is important to note that Spinoza has nothing against one practicing the ceremonial law (after all, if it will still help the masses to obey the true Divine law then they should) but he simply can see no real reason for it. The point of it was to guarantee security and cooperation, and modern societies possess other means for ensuring these goals. It not so much that it is wrong to obey the ceremonial law, as it is superfluous.[35]

Having removed from Scripture the authority of prophecy, miracles and the revealed law, it is fair to ask of Spinoza how he can maintain that Scripture is still to be considered Divine and sacred. For Spinoza, the answer is easy, for Scripture is Divine insofar as it teaches the true religion and leads to proper conduct. In Spinoza's words

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[33] Ibid, pg.69

[34] Ibid, pg.72

[35] However, if one uses the "divinity" of the ceremonial law to harass people or to stifle free thought (as the Amsterdam Jewish community did to Spinoza), then the ceremonial law becomes dangerous and should be actively rejected and fought against. In other words, one has the freedom to obey the ceremonial law on one's own if one wishes to, but one does not have the freedom to impose obedience on someone else who does not wish it, although Spinoza will waffle on this point a little when he comes to the discussion of the right of the state to impose a state religion (see below).

> I think I have shown now sufficiently in what respect Scripture should be accounted sacred and Divine...in other words, [teaching] religion, universal and catholic to the whole human race...teaching that the true way of life consists, not in ceremonies, but in charity, and a true heart, and calling it indifferently God's Law and God's Word...
>
> There are, then three causes for the Bible's being called the Word of God: because it teaches true religion, of which God is the eternal founder; because it narrates predictions of future events as though they were decrees of God (thereby recognizing the necessity of things - my addition); because its actual authors generally perceived things not by their ordinary natural faculties, but by a power peculiar to themselves, and introduced these things perceived, as told them by God (in the manner described for prophecy above - my addition)...
>
> We can thus easily see how God can be said to be the author of the Bible: it is because of the true religion therein contained, and not because He wished to communicate to men a certain number of books.[36]

Because Scripture serves these vital functions, it <u>is</u> important, as Spinoza stresses again and again

> ...I would expressly state (though I have said it before) that I consider the utility and the need for Holy Scripture or Revelation to be very great. For as we cannot perceive by the natural light of reason that simple obedience is the path of salvation, and are taught by revelation only that it is so by the special grace of God, which our reason cannot attain, it follows that the Bible has brought a very great consolation to mankind. All are able to obey, whereas there are but very few, compared with the aggregate of humanity, who can acquire the habit of virtue under the unaided guidance of reason. Thus if we had not the testimony of Scripture, we should doubt of the salvation of nearly all men.[37]

Of course, by salvation Spinoza means his concept of blessedness, as discussed in chapter 6.

Since Spinoza has mentioned the true religion over and over again, it is also fair to ask what the true religion is.

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[36] <u>The Theological-Political Tractate</u>, pp.169-170

[37] Ibid, pp.198-199

For Spinoza, the answer is simple. The true religion is obeying the Divine law.[38] The Divine law simply consists of two things - to love God, and to obey God, which simply means to love one's neighbor.[39] From the nature of this Divine law, Spinoza can draw several conclusions, most of which are evident from the above discussions. As he says

> As the love of God is man's highest happiness and blessedness, and the ultimate end and aim of all human actions, it follows that he alone lives by the Divine law who loves God not from fear of punishment, or from love of any other object...but solely because he has knowledge of God, or is convinced that the knowledge and love of God is the highest good. The sum and chief precept, then, of the Divine law is to love God as the highest good...The idea of God lays down the rule that God is our highest good - in other words, that the knowledge and love of God is the ultimate aim to which all our action should be directed...
>
> If we consider the nature of natural Divine law as we have just explained it, we shall see
>
> I. That it is universal or common to all men, for we have deduced it from universal human nature.
>
> II. That it does not depend on the truth of any historical narrative whatsoever...Still, though the truth of histories cannot give us the knowledge and love of God, I do not deny that reading them is very useful with a view to life in the world, for the more we have observed and known of men's customs and circumstances, which are best revealed by their actions, the more warily we shall be able to order our lives among them, and so far as reason dictates to adapt our actions to their dispositions.[40]
>
> III. We see that this natural Divine law does not demand the performance of ceremonies - that is, actions in themselves indifferent, which are called good from the fact of their institution, or actions symbolizing something profitable for salvation, or actions of which the meaning surpasses human understanding...
>
> IV. Lastly, we see that the highest reward of the

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[38] Ibid, pg.59

[39] Ibid, pg.176

[40] Note the uncanny similarity to Kaplan's position.

> Divine law is the law itself, namely, to know God and to love Him of our free choice, and with an undivided and fruitful spirit; while its penalty is the abscence of these things, and being in bondage to the flesh - that is, having an inconstant and wavering spirit.[41]

Having explained the divine law, Spinoza can then state the precepts of the true religion as he sees it

> To the universal religion, then, belong only such dogmas as are absolutely required in order to attain obedience to God, and without which such obedience would be impossible; as for the rest, each man - seeing that he is the best judge of his own character - should adopt whatever he thinks best adapted to strengthen his love of justice...I have now no further fear in enumerating the dogmas of universal faith or the fundamental dogmas of the whole of Scripture...
>
> I. That God or a Supreme Being exists, sovereignly just and merciful, the Exemplar of the true life; that whosoever is ignorant of or disbelieves in His existence cannot obey Him or know Him as a Judge.
>
> II. That He is One. Nobody will dispute that this doctrine is absolutely necessary for entire devotion, admiration, and love towards God. For devotion, admiration, and love spring from the superiority of one over all else.
>
> III. That He is omnipresent, or that all things are open to Him, for if anything could be supposed to be concealed from Him, or to be unnoticed by Him, we might doubt or be ignorant of the equity of His judgement as directing all things.
>
> IV. That He has supreme right and dominion over all things, and that He does nothing under compulsion, but by His absolute fiat and grace. All things are bound to obey Him, he is not bound to obey any.
>
> V. That the worship of God consists only in justice and charity, or love towards one's neighbour.
>
> VI. That all those, and those only, who obey God by their manner of life are saved; the rest of mankind, who live under the sway of their pleasures, are lost. If we did not believe this, there would be no reason for obeying God rather than pleasure.
>
> VII. Lastly, that God forgives the sins of those who repent. No one is free from sin, so that without this belief all would despair of salvation, and there

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[41] The Theological-Political Tractate, pp.61-62

would be no reason for believing in the mercy of God...[42]

It is important to point out that what Spinoza means by the above are the things already enumerated in the earlier chapters on Spinoza's concept of God and soteria; for example, by salvation, he means blessedness, and by God being omnipresent, he is talking about the one substance of the universe that exists everywhere. Thus, even though he appears to be using traditional theological terms and categories, he really means them in the specific way that he understands them, not the way that they are traditionally used. This, then, is the true religion, and insofar as Scripture teaches it, Scripture is Divine and sacred.

Since the true religion is the only religion that matters, it is evident that Spinoza is not going to approve of any attempts to force doctrine onto anyone. His philosophical position demands freedom of religion, and this is exactly what he advocates. He has this to say about faith and its relation to the true religion

> ...it is plain to everyone that the Bible was not written and disseminated only for the learned, but for men of every age and race; wherefore we may rest assured that we are not bound by Scriptural command to believe anything beyond what is absolutely necessary for fulfilling its main precept.[43]

and

> Furthermore, faith is not affected, whether we hold

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[42] Ibid, pp.186-187

[43] Ibid, pg.184

> that God is omnipresent essentially or potentially; that He directs all things by absolute fiat, or by the necessity of His nature; that He dictates laws like a prince, or that He sets them forth as eternal truths; that man obeys Him by virtue of free will, or by virtue of the necessity of the Divine decree; lastly, that the reward of the good and the punishment of the wicked is natural or supernatural: these and such like questions have no bearing on faith, except in so far as they are used as means to give us license to sin more, or to obey God less. I will go further, and maintain that every man is bound to adapt these dogmas to his own way of thinking, and to interpret them according as he feels that he can give them his fullest and most unhesitating assent, so that he may the more easily obey God with his whole heart.[44]

It is interesting to note that Spinoza even defends the right of someone to disagree with him. Spinoza is sure that he is correct, but if someone else wants to believe in a supernatural Deity, that is fine with him (even though they are merely being superstitious), as long as they meet the acid test for obeying the true religion - that of acting decently and charitably. Spinoza can do this because he sees a marked difference between philosophy and faith - philosophy seeks true knowledge, while faith merely inspires people to obey God.[45] Therefore, the private opinions a person holds are irrelevant, as long as a person's acts are in accord with the Divine law and the true religion. As Spinoza says

> ...we...must maintain that a man is pious or impious in his beliefs only in so far as he is thereby incited to obedience, or derives from them license to sin and rebel. If a man, by believing what is true, becomes rebellious, his creed is impious; if by believing what is false he becomes obedient, his creed is pious; for the true

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[44] Ibid, pg.188

[45] Ibid, pg.189

> knowledge of God comes not by commandment, but by Divine gift. God has required nothing from man but a knowledge of His Divine justice and charity, and that not as necessary to scientific accuracy, but to obedience.[46]

And, since religion is a private matter that effects only an individual's thoughts

> ...as men's habits of mind differ, so that some more readily embrace one form of faith, some another, for what moves one to pray may move another only to scoff, I conclude, in accordance with what has gone before, that everyone should be free to choose for himself the foundations of his creed, and that faith should be judged only by its fruits; each would then obey God freely with his whole heart, while nothing would be publicly honored save justice and charity.[47]

For someone who takes this position, however, Spinoza does an incredible (and illogical) about face. Perhaps it is because he just wanted to be left alone and to avoid persecution, but Spinoza actually defends the right of a state to have a state religion! After a long discussion of the dangers of a church that has political power[48], Spinoza then says that the sovereign of a state has the right to impose a state religion. To his credit, however, Spinoza is very careful to insist that only the sovereign (<u>not</u> a particular church) has the right to impose this religion, and then only in outward form. In other words, for the sake of public peace and well-being, the sovereign may impose certain rites and outward demonstrations of piety, but even the sovereign may

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[46] Ibid, pp.180-181

[47] Ibid, pg.10

[48] Ibid, pp.241-243

not impose dogma on the populace. Not only is such imposition philosophically immoral, it is also practically impossible.[49] Spinoza explains this in the following way

> I wish, however, first to point out that religion acquires its force solely from the decrees of the sovereign. God has no special kingdom among men except in so far as He reigns through temporal rulers. Moreover, the rites of religion and the outward observances of piety should be in accordance with the public peace and well-being, and should therefore be determined by the sovereign power alone. I speak here only of the outward observances of piety and the external rites of religion, not of piety itself, nor of the inward worship of God, nor the means by which the mind is inwardly led to do homage to God in singleness of heart. Inward worship of God and piety in itself are within the sphere of everyone's private rights, and cannot be alienated.[50]

Thus the state may legitimately impose a state religion, concerned with behavior, but it may not in any way infringe upon the right of an individual to freedom of thought.

This nearly completes the discussion of Spinoza's views on the Bible, chosenness, ritual and religion. All that remains is to point out something that some scholars of Spinoza (especially Allison) seem to have missed. Because Spinoza mentions Christ (as a teacher of the true religion, similar to Moses) a lot in his work, and spends most of his time discussing the Old Testament, some seem to think that Spinoza was limiting his criticism of religion to Judaism alone. This is far from the case, as just a few citations

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[49] How can one legislate a person's internal thoughts? This is one of Spinoza's primary objections to dogma in the first place.

[50] Ibid, pg.245

will show. Spinoza held any religion caught in the grip of superstition in contempt and he considered Judaism, Christianity and Islam[51] equally guilty. Here is what he had to say concerning the other western religions

> As for Christian rites, such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, festivals, public prayers, and any other observances which are, and always have been, common to all Christendom, if they were instituted by Christ or His Apostles (which is open to doubt), they were instituted as external signs of the universal church, and not as having anything to do with blessedness, or possessing any sanctity in themselves. Therefore, though such ceremonies were not ordained for the sake of upholding a government, they were ordained for the preservation of a society, and accordingly he who lives alone is not bound by them: nay, those who live in a country where the Christian religion is forbidden, are bound to abstain from such rites, and can none the less live in a state of blessedness.[52]

and, in a letter to Burgh[53]

> ...When you were sane, if I am not mistaken, you used to worship an infinite God, by whose power all things absolutely come into being, and are preserved: but now you dream of a Prince, an enemy of God, who, against the will of God, misleads and deceives most men (for good men are rare), whom God consequently delivers up to this master of vices to be tortured for all eternity. Thus divine justice permits the Devil to deceive men with imputiny, but does not permit the men who have been

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[51] He probably felt this way about any other religions that he knew about who claimed to teach the truth in the form of religious dogmas, but the three western religions are the only ones he mentions by name. He felt the greatest sympathy for certain liberal Protestant religions, but only because they were closest to what he considered to be the true religion. The fact that he really didn't approve of any of them is evidenced by the fact that when he was offered a professorship at the University of Heidelberg in 1673 on the condition that he convert to Protestantism, he refused.

[52] The Theological-Political Tractate, pg.76

[53] Burgh was a correspondent of Spinoza who converted to Roman Catholicism and then challenged Spinoza to follow suit.

> miserably deceived and misled by this same Devil to go unpunished.
>
> These absurdities might still be tolerated if you worshipped a God infinite and eternal, and not one whom Chastillon in the town of Tienen, as it is called by the Dutch, gave with imputiny to the horses to eat. And do you, unhappy one, weep for me?...O brainless youth, who has bewitched you, so that you believe that you swallow the highest and the eternal, and that you hold it in your intestines?...
>
> The order of the Roman Church, which you so greatly praise, I confess, is politic and lucrative to many. I should think that there was none more suited to deceive the people and to constrain the minds of men, were there not the order of the Mahomedan Church which far surpasses it. For from the time that this superstition began there have arisen no schisms in their Church.[54]

Spinoza attacks the other western religions in other places, but the point is made - in so far as the Holy Writings of a religion (the New Testament and the Quran) teach the true religion, they are sacred, but in so far as they teach superstition, they can be ignored.[55]

This concludes the discussion of Spinoza's attitude towards religion and its attendant teachings. Consistent with his God concept and his naturalistic approach, Spinoza holds that Scripture teaches nothing of true knowledge, and mistakenly attributes to the supernatural what must be understood in a naturalistic way. Scripture is a human product, and as such can be flawed. It can also be studied like any other product of the natural world. Its doctrines and rituals only exist for purposes of statecraft, and as such its rites have long outgrown their significance. The only

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[54] The Correspondence of Spinoza, pp.352-354

[55] Ibid, pg.259

real value to Scripture is that it teaches the true religion and inculcates obedience, effects that can be realized either through philosophy or faith, with neither one affecting the other. Since all religious dogmas besides those of the true religion are superstition, freedom of thought must be allowed to every individual, while the only accurate way to determine whether a person is pious or not is to look at their acts and see whether they are good or bad. All this follows logically from Spinoza's concept of God, but the most interesting thing is how Kaplan, starting from a completely different view of God, will arrive at very many of the same conclusions - a topic that will be taken up in the next chapter.

Chapter 9: Kaplan on Bible, Chosenness and Ritual

Kaplan, like Spinoza, faces the challenge of giving the Bible and its doctrines meaning in a naturalistic universe. Since there is no supernatural Deity who could have revealed His will, Kaplan naturally holds the view that the Bible is a human document, and that it is therefore subject to study and criticism. In fact, Kaplan's entire justification for the reconstructionist enterprise is that the old structure of belief in a supernatural reality is simply untenable to the modern mind.[1] Kaplan faces a greater challenge than Spinoza however, for where Spinoza is content to affirm the value of Scripture while throwing out the entire dogmatic and ritual structure associated with it (thereby advocating the true religion as the only necessary religion), Kaplan is determined to save Judaism as a unique and viable religion. In order to do this, Kaplan must come up with a reason why the Bible and Jewish ritual are still important in a way that won't compromise his basic theological and epistemological approach. Kaplan feels he has done this, and essential to his formulation is his conception of Jewish peoplehood.

That peoplehood will form the basis of Kaplan's approach should not be surprising. As should be clear by now, Kaplan's whole approach is psychosocial, and this approach requires that a social group be present. For Judaism, this social

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[1] See chapter 3.

group consists of Jews, and therefore the idea of Jewish peoplehood assumes paramount importance. Using this concept, Kaplan will arrive at a form of dynamic Judaism, in which the Jewish people's interaction with their tradition will form a modern Judaism for the present day. The best way to see how Kaplan does this is to go through his argument step by step, after which it will be evaluated.

Kaplan begins his argument by defining what it is he means by peoplehood. What follows is a selection of what he has to say on the subject

> The Jew's religion is but one element in his life that is challenged by the present environment...Put more specifically, this [saving the otherness of Jewish life] means that apart from the life which, as a citizen, the Jew shares with the non-Jews, his life should consist of certain social relationships to maintain, cultural interests to foster, activities to engage in, organizations to belong to, amenities to conform to, moral and social standards to live up to as a Jew. All this constitutes the element of otherness. Judaism as otherness is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, and esthetic values which in their totality form a civilization...the term "civilization" is usually applied to the accumulation of knowledge, skills, tools, arts, literatures, laws, religions, and philosophies which stands between man and external nature and which serves as a bulwark against the hostility of forces that would otherwise destroy him...A civilization is not a deliberate creation. It is as spontaneous a growth as any living organism. Once it exists it can be guided and directed, but its existence must be determined by the imperative of a national tradition and the will to live as a nation. Civilization arises not out of planned cooperation but out of centuries of inevitable living, working, and striving together...The process cannot wait until the child reaches the age of choice. Civilizations live by the inherent right to direct the child into their ways. It is only thus that the whole course of human

development has been made possible.[2]

Ethnic consciousness, or the sense of peoplehood, functions through the medium of a living civilization, which is an organic ensemble of the following cultural elements having their rootage in a specific territory: a common tradition, a common language and literature, history, laws, customs, and folkways, with religion as the integrating and soul-giving factor of those elements. To this ensemble must be added an active leadership which is concerned with translating that tradition into a means of serving the essential needs of all who are identified with the people. The foremost among those are: being wanted and having something to be proud of.

An ethnic consciousness is thus coextensive with a unit of civilization. An ethnic consciousness is a group soul, the body of which is the particular civilization through which it functions. Both the consciousness and its body, or vehicle, are distinctively human creations. They exist as two aspects of a manifold of specific living realities known as peoples. Neither ethnic consciousness nor civilization exists merely in the abstract...These considerations should help us to see each of the various elements of a civilization in a new light - as the highest manifestation of human life struggling to live.[3]

What the Jewish people should mean to the individual Jew may be illustrated by the famous answer given by George Malory, one of the greatest mountain climbers, when asked why he wanted to climb Everest. He simply replied, "Because it is there." Likewise when we are asked, "Why remain Jews?" the only reason we should feel called upon to give is: "Because the Jewish people is here and we are part of it." Unless we feel that to belong to the Jewish people is a high spiritual adventure which has intrinsic value regardless of consequences and practical ends, our Jewishness is tantamount to the interest of casual tourists in foreign countries.

Since the Jewish people is indispensable to the Jew as a human person, and since it has always given him the feeling of being in *rapport* with God, identification with the Jewish people provides Jewish religion with the indispensable dimension of the mystical. On the face of it, nothing should seem more obvious, yet it is the very obviousness that seems to have led many a Jewish thinker

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[2] Judaism as a Civilization, pp.177-181

[3] Dynamic Judaism, pp.53-54

> and theologian to develop a blind spot for the mystic character of this self-identification with the Jewish people. They seem to see in it only the socio-psychological significance which the non-Jewish social scientist, as an outsider, can see in it. But if they would stop to consider for one moment the entire regimen of Jewish religious practice and ritual and note the extraordinary fact that the individual Jew never takes part in them without associating himself with the whole house of Israel, they would begin to sense the extent to which this association with the Jewish people is not merely a socio-psychological, but a definitely mystical, experience.[4]
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> Peoplehood is that social structure of a society from the most primitive to the most advanced, including government, economy, culture, and religion, which provides through those organizations and institutions the necessary conditions for salvation, or the self-fulfillment of the individual.[5]
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> The Jewish People, which constitutes the common unifying objective, is not merely the body of men, women and children who are our contemporaries. It is the succession of generations that have known themselves as in a continuous line not merely of physical, but also of spiritual, descent. It has thus satisfied and can continue to satisfy the natural yearning, not so much for an identifiable *physical* ancestry as for an identifiable *spiritual* ancestry. These facts about Jewish peoplehood bring to light the need for some new emphases.[6]

Several conclusions can be drawn from Kaplan's explanation. First off, a civilization is inherently valuable to its members. Consistent with his epistemological approach, Kaplan argues that a Jew can no more be separated from the Jewish civilization than up from down or right from left. Being born a Jew implies membership in the Jewish civilization, with said civilization helping to form the very personality of the

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[4] Ibid, pp.64-65

[5] Ibid, pg.55

[6] Judaism without Supernaturalism, pg.30

individual. In the second place, the Jewish civilization has an inherent right to exist, and the right to indoctrinate its members (especially the young) in its ways. All civilizations, as long as they are organized around the principle of achieving soteria for their members, possess these two fundamental rights, and the Jewish civilization is no exception. In the third place, civilizations are dynamic, and have the right to grow and evolve and change, as long as they do so by taking account of their past and by remaining focused on their objective. Kaplan does not specifically say so, but it is implied that if a civilization ceases to be meaningful to its members, or ceases to provide soteria for them, then it has forfeited its right to exist.[7] And finally, Kaplan asserts that the Jewish civilization is important for Jews, that it gives them things no other civilization can, and that therefore only it can fully satisfy the Jews.

Given this concept of peoplehood and his naturalistic bent, it is obvious that for Kaplan the Bible and its doctrines (and, by extension, Rabbinic tradition) are going to be very important but not sacred. More exactly, the ideas and functions behind the Bible and its doctrines are going to be sacred, but their literal truth is not. The Bible, along with other Jewish cultural expressions throughout the ages, should

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[7] Thus, as mentioned in chapter 7, Kaplan would most likely argue that Nazi civilization has forfeited its right to exist, as it "involves a maladjustment of Germany to the rest of the world", and therefore cannot bring soteria to its members.

be considered the raw material from which the modern Jewish civilization, with the preservation of Jewish peoplehood as its goal, is to be constructed. According to Kaplan, the Bible does not teach literal, dogmatic truth (as modern Biblical scholarship makes evident), but rather represents the Jewish people's initial struggle with creating a civilization around the goal of salvation for its members.

Unfortunately for the task of presenting Kaplan's ideas in a systematic manner, Kaplan is at his least systematic and at his most homiletical when it comes to his description of the importance of the Bible. His ideas are scattered throughout his works, and one, The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, is almost wholly dedicated to page after page of reconstruction of Biblical and Rabbinic tradition in line with Kaplan's concepts. A systematic presentation is nearly impossible, so what follows is a sampling of the different aspects of Kaplan's conception of what Torah should mean in the modern day. In no particular order, these illustrate all the main ideas in his conception of Torah

> Undoubtedly the assertion that the Ten Commandments were spoken by God at Sinai, taken literally, conveys a fact which is in conflict with the modern man's outlook. But a knowledge of the workings of the ancient mind and of the way it was wont to report its profoundest experience has taught us to penetrate beneath the surface of a tradition and to get the functional significance of that tradition, from the standpoint of the attitudes and behavior it was intended to call forth...Suppose an ancient people, untutored in philosophic speculation, had the irresistible intuition that the ethical values stemmed from a source other than that of individual expediency - by no means incredible - how could they put that intuition into words other than those recorded in

the Jewish tradition?...The sense of inner compulsion which a highly important truth always carried with it led the ancients to ascribe that truth to a source which belonged to a different dimension of being from that of normal experience. Such a source could only be divine revelation.[8]

The foremost problem in Jewish religion is how to get Jews to take the Bible seriously without taking it literally.[9]

Our first task is to identify the pragmatic implications of Torah, or the specific ways in which it has functioned hitherto in the Jewish consciousness. The next step is to ignore those implications which have become obsolete and to elaborate and implement the rest. There are, in fact, only two implications which have become obsolete: (1) that the Pentateuch, or the Torah of Moses, is a supernaturally dictated text, and (2) that it alone is the final source of whatever is authoritative in Jewish life, whether in terms of law or of social control. On the other hand, there are far more relevant implications than obsolete ones.[10]

Torah has lifted education to the level of religion. It declares the transmission of the knowledge and experience necessary for the achievement of salvation to be the most important duty which God has placed upon both parents and nations.[11]

The very notion that any text written hundreds of years ago, at a time when the social situation was radically different from what it is today, can give us clear and valuable guidance in deciding, ethically, issues that did not arise until recent times is utterly antagonistic to the modern evolutionary outlook. No matter how we may reverence the authors of the biblical books as teachers of justice and righteousness, we cannot today determine what is right in the ethical problems that come before us by reference to a biblical text.[12]

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[8] Dynamic Judaism, pg.112

[9] Ibid, pg.104

[10] Ibid, pg.100

[11] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.83

[12] The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, pg.11

The existential reality of the Jewish people and certainly the religious significance of its peoplehood are inconceivable apart from the Bible. A Jew's relation to the Bible is not to be merely that of one interested in an ancient literature or in a collection of extraordinary writings. To begin with, an American Jew, for example, should as a Jew feel toward the Bible as he feels as an American toward the Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution. As these give being, name, and status to the American nation, so the Bible gives them to the Jewish people...To take the Torah seriously requires, in the first place, to learn to view it dynamically, that is, as subject to change and development. The Bill of Rights, or the Amendments to the Federal Constitution, are what give the latter its dynamism. That fact has its analogy in the growth of Jewish law and interpretation since the canonization of the Pentateuchal Torah. Seen in this light, whatever new developments take place in Jewish life, in democratic response to new and unprecedented challenges and emergencies, should be regarded as Torah and as equally binding. Although Jews seem at present very far from adopting such an attitude toward the Torah, it represents an inevitable goal, if the Jewish people is to survive, and if Jews are to realize their peoplehood for their own spiritual enhancement and for that of the world. As for the rest of the Bible, the historic act of its cannonization in itself marks that expansion of Torah which constitutes its dynamic character...The edification which the modern Jew should derive from the Histories, the Books of the Prophets, the Psalms, and the books of Wisdom should consist not only in a heightened spiritual mood, but also in a deepened Jewish consciousness.[13]

Today we are in a position to perceive that the experience of our people was not unlike that of other peoples, and we are able to explain, with the aid of the human sciences, the origin of legal institutions and to trace most of the features, which are unique in any civilization, to specific conditioning circumstances. It becomes, therefore, too pretentious for us to assume that our Torah is the *only* way of life for *all* peoples. We may recognize its value as the organized effort of our people to realize its highest ideals, and this may make it truly a way of salvation for the Jewish people. No other doctrine and discipline can serve them as well because, as a matter of historic fact, no other doctrine and discipline developed out of the exigencies of their own collective life in response to their own special

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[13] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pp.35-36

needs and as an expression of their own collective purpose.

Evaluated in this light, the Torah may still be considered as a divine revelation in the sense that it testifies to the reality of God as the spirit that promotes righteousness in the world. To assert this is not, however, to affirm what our fathers meant when they spoke of *Torah min hashamayim*. It affirms that the Torah reveals God, not that God revealed the Torah. It assumes that the process by which the Torah actually came into being is divine, in the sense that it is a manifestation of the will to salvation or life abundant and that the doctrines and laws of other civilizations, being part of the same process, also are divine. To be sure, they are divine only to the extent that they actually do express principles which help men to live well; a limitation that applies also to Jewish law.

The modern Jew cannot, therefore, look to the Torah as a source of authority, in the sense that whatever it permits is right and whatever it forbids is wrong. He reverses the process and says: Whatever is right should be incorporated in our Torah, and whatever is wrong should be eliminated from our Torah. Inasmuch as no man can know, merely on the basis of personal experience, what is right and wrong in every situation, the traditional standards of right and wrong cherished by our people, and the institutions sanctioned by the Torah as aids to spiritual discipline, can and should be regarded with reverence, and should be observed, wherever experience has not challenged their validity. But we must not cling to the standards of the past, if they work mischief in the present.[14]

A Torah-less Judaism may hang on to life for a generation or two, but its end is inevitable. Hence, our problem is what to do to reinstate the Torah in the life of the Jew. To be sure, we cannot any longer expect the Torah to be utilized by the Jew as the sole humanizing and civilizing agency. We may, however, so interpret its scope and function as to give it first place among the ethical and cultural influences that shape his life. Why limit Torah to the study of texts, all-important as those texts are, when in reality Torah represents a living and continuing process rather than a final attainment? Torah should remind us of the truth that Judaism can function as a way of life only so long as the Jew is engaged in a lifelong process of moral education. The duty of Torah should signify the duty of treating life as an art which it is our business to keep on perfecting. Like all arts,

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[14] Dynamic Judaism, pp.94-95

the art of life can be perfected only by taking thought. When our people will accept this larger significance of Torah, they will inevitably go back to the classic literature of the Jewish people; for, you cannot touch upon any phase of the problem of life without reckoning with the wisdom and experience of Israel as embodied in our sacred writings.

This truth that lifelong moral education is the paramount religious duty of the human being is far-reaching enough to constitute a world mission, if we are looking for one.[15]

Even if the standard we choose to live by deviates from the one prescribed in the Torah, so long as that standard is in keeping with the fundamental purpose of the Torah, it is as much entitled to be considered Torah as the rabbinic and philosophic interpretations which read into the Torah a great deal that was not there. The only alternatives to that procedure are either no Torah or some new Torah. The first alternative is unthinkable because it would put an end to the Jewish people. The second alternative is unthinkable because it would destroy the spiritual continuity of the Jewish people. We must therefore resort to the evolutionary conception of the Torah as an ongoing process.

That conception, however, is bound to appear labored and artificial unless we take into account one of the fundamental principles of on which the Torah is based - namely, that God is to be sought in the history of man's effort to learn the meaning of salvation and in the striving to attain it. In the light of that principle, the very distance we have traveled away from those beginnings which are recorded in the Torah should be treated as history of that kind. The slightest moral or spiritual advance which any law, institution, or event recorded in the Torah reflects should be noted as constituting the initial leap into a new dimension of human evolution. But the advance since the one recorded in the Torah should figure equally as Torah, for it marks the growth which the Jewish people has achieved in its efforts to apprehend the meaning of salvation and salvation's God.[16]

First, we wish to suggest that broadening the concept of Torah implies among other things realizing that we Jews have no monopoly on the wisdom of life. On the contrary, the wisdom which we should display as

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[15] Ibid, pg.97

[16] Ibid, pg.90

> synonymous with Torah should consist in our learning from the wisdom of all peoples, both ancient and modern, acquired by them in the course of their striving for the fulfillment of human destiny...
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> Secondly, we wish to give Torah a connotation of directed growth and development. That is an idea or value which is lacking in our tradition. The capacity to be self-critical, to recognize that Torah or education may have taken "a wrong direction," and that "this work of reformation is the business of every man while he lives," is essential not only as a means of regenerating the tradition but also of perpetuating it. As a tradition succeeds in reforming or reconstructing itself to meet new needs of man, it acquires a new lease on life.[17]

Several things should be evident in these passages. In the first place, the Torah is a human document, written at definite times, in definite places and in definite cultural contexts. Thus, it is not infallible[18], though, according to Kaplan, its basic function is - the function of affirming that the world contains the necessary means for salvation. Since it represents the earliest strivings of Israel to know God (as Kaplan understands God) and to achieve salvation, it is an important document, one that should maintain its importance to the modern Jew, for it gives the modern Jew valuable guidance and insight into how the quest for salvation should be fulfilled. At the same time, the "text" of what is considered Torah needs to be expanded, to include the wisdom of other peoples and to reflect new developments in Jewish thought throughout the ages. The Torah is also an evolutionary

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[17] Ibid, pg.102

[18] In fact, it is often wrong, especially when it refers to supernatural events and beings.

document, in that it serves the people rather than the people serving it. Kaplan maintains that this was always true, but that the change in recent times is that the Jewish people are now conscious of the changes they make. Since this is the case, Kaplan can maintain that Torah can be added to and subtracted to by the Jewish people, so that they can create a Judaism they can live with. A concept of Torah is critical though, for Torah acts as the "constitution" of the Jewish people. In Kaplan's opinion, a Jewish people without the Torah, or without a Torah that includes the Pentateuch, is just not the Jewish people.[19] So Torah is natural, but it is also crucial.

Having abolished the (literal) Divine origin of the Torah and any claim to its containing actual truth, Kaplan must find a reason to justify following the ritual laws and practices of Judaism. Given his sociological approach, the answer Kaplan arrives at should not surprise anyone. Kaplan's argument is simply that the ritual practices of Judaism form the cultural folkways that make up Jewish life. Much as an American celebrates Thanksgiving and watches the Super Bowl, or an Englishman drinks tea at 4:00 and watches the Rugby World Cup, the practices of Jewish life form the culture in which Jews move and live. Since this culture is, according to Kaplan, a positive one (after all, the culture is aimed at

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[19] The logical problems inherent in this view of Torah will be taken up below.

helping the Jew to achieve salvation and live a moral life), the folkways of the Jewish people are important and invaluable. At the same time, these folkways are not sacrosanct, and Jews are able to discard, modify, or keep them in their entirety depending on their usefulness to the modern Jew. Kaplan explains his view in the following way

> A pragmatic consequence of the fact that Jewish peoplehood is a dimension of the Jewish religion bears on the concept of *mitzvot*. It enables the Jew who can no longer accept his tradition in the form in which it has come down to him so to reinterpret that tradition as to render it viable. Literally understood, *mitzvot* means laws commanded by God. According to tradition, all the 613 *mitzvot* were actually dictated by God. That belief had the effect of rendering them immutable. When conditions of life and thought made them obsolete, as was true of the entire sacrificial cult, the traditionalists had to persuade themselves that those *mitzvot* were merely suspended for a time. When, as in the case of other *mitzvot*, the traditional version became restrictive, legal fictions or sophistries were resorted to as a means of overcoming their restrictive character. Neither solution could satisfy those for whom the *mitzvot* had the same kind of human history as the cult practices of all other religions.
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> On the other hand, to resort to the secularist solution of abolishing the *mitzvot* altogether is to perform a surgical operation that might kill the patient. A third alternative is to transfer them from the dimension of divinity to the dimension of peoplehood as an indispensable dimension of religion. The *mitzvot* would thus retain their imperative character, not merely because they are the product of collective Jewish life but because they point to the same cosmic or divine drive as that which impels man to transcend his animal heredity. So viewed, *mitzvot* have to be relevant to our spiritual needs. Some traditional *mitzvot* may become obsolete, some may have to be modified, and some may have to be created anew.[20]

> It is of vital importance to have a significant term besides *mitzvot* for those customs which have been referred to as "commandments pertaining to the relations

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[20] Dynamic Judaism, pp.62-63

between man and God." A term is needed that would indicate a different approach from that with which we come to positive law or jurisprudence. The term "folkways" meets that requirement...If we were henceforth to designate all "commandments pertaining to the relations between man and God" as *minhagim* or "folkways," we would accomplish a twofold purpose. First, we would convey the thought that they should not be dealt with in a legalistic spirit, a spirit that often gives rise to quibbling and pettifogging. They should be dealt with as the very stuff of Jewish life, which should be experienced with spontaneity and joy, and which can be modified as circumstances require. Secondly, we would convey the implication that not only should as many "commandments" or folkways as possible be retained and developed, but that Jewish life should be stimulated to evolve new and additional folkways. Folkways are the social practices by which a people externalizes the reality of its collective being. The more alive the collective being, the more it abounds in affirmative folkways...[21]

Kaplan does not feel that such an approach to Jewish ritual represents a radical break with tradition.[22] As he says

> If the changes proposed for Jewish ritual are intended to give it vitality and freshness, there is no need to fear that such changes will ever lead to a radical break with tradition. Reconstructionism does not wish to give a *coup de grace* to important rites which, in our day, tend to be neglected. On the contrary, it wishes so to modify them that they would be likely to be revived. To reconstruct means to reaffirm, reachieve, reestablish.[23]

Kaplan provides a concrete example of what he is talking about when he discusses a possible way of looking at the dietary

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[21] Judaism as a Civilization, pp.431-433

[22] Although he is wrong here - it is a radical break. There is all the difference in the world between viewing the law as commanded by God and seeing it as the cultural product of a people. For starters, the latter can be changed, while the former is immutable.

[23] Dynamic Judaism, pg.220

laws (*kashrut*). He says

> But if Jews are not to exaggerate the importance of the dietary practices, neither should they underestimate the effect those practices can have in making a home Jewish. If the dietary folkways are capable of striking a spiritual note in the home atmosphere, Jews cannot afford to disregard them.
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> Once these practices lose their character as laws and become folkways, Jews will be able to exercise better judgement as to the manner of their observance. There need not be the feeling of sin in case of occasional remissness, nor the self-complacency which results from scrupulous observance. Moreover, since the main purpose of these practices is to add Jewish atmosphere to the home, there is no reason for suffering the inconvenience and self-deprivation which result from a rigid adherence outside the home. From the standpoint urged here it would not be amiss for a Jew to eat freely in the house of a Gentile and to refrain from eating *trefa* in the house of a fellow Jew.[24]

Not surprisingly, Kaplan takes the same tack when he talks about public prayer, a subset of the ritual law. Prayer is also a folkway of the Jewish people, one of its most important, for it is in public worship that the Jew experiences the reality of God. As he explains

> There is a tendency nowadays to treat all religious ritual, and especially prayer, as the concern of the individual. This tendency should not be taken too seriously. Worship is too deeply rooted in the social nature of the human being to be easily discarded. So long as a people will have holidays and festivals to commemorate the events in its career, to recall its victories and to confirm its strivings, the institution of public worship will remain. Public worship is a means of giving a people that collective consciousness which unifies its life and integrates all of its individuals into an organized totality. Though its form may change, it is certain that before long it will be reinstated in all normally functioning civilizations...
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> Public worship is far from incompatible with the modern outlook on life. It has far more exalted uses than that of setting in motion forces that might fulfill

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[24] Judaism as a Civilization, pg.441

one's private desires. Those uses go together with a conception of God which precludes the magical consequences of offering praises addressed to Him. Likewise, the authoritarian aspect of ritualism is no longer tenable, for it can no longer be believed that, in order to be effective, worship must take on the form laid down by authority, and that the least departure from it is heresy and rebellion. A certain element of uniformity is necessary, because it is the very purpose of worship to arouse a feeling of common consciousness. But to make uniformity an indispensable requisite of worship negates spontaneous self-expression...

Public worship meets two essential needs of human nature: the need for selecting and retaining those aspects of reality that make life significant, and the need for identifying oneself with a community which aspires to make life significant. Public worship meets this twofold need, because it affirms this meaning of life and the primacy of its moral and spiritual values, and because it gives reality, purpose, and self-consciousness to the collective spirit of a people. The usual objection to the traditional liturgy is that it abounds in endless praises of the Deity. But even that objection can be easily overruled. Only a philistine literalism can miss the poetic beauty and majesty of the traditional type of hymnologies. Primitive man, no doubt, resorted to praising his deity as a means of eliciting favors from him. But in the higher civilizations, when the pious sang praises to God they gave utterance to the ineffable delight they derived from communion with Him. The modern equivalent of that experience is a glimpse into life's unity, creativity, and worthwhileness. To articulate that experience in the midst of a worshipping throng is a spiritual necessity of the normal man. He needs it as a means of affirming the meaning of life and of renewing his spirit.[25]

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[25] Judaism as a Civilization, pp.346-347. Kaplan was as good as his word here. The Reconstructionist prayerbook contains virtually exactly the traditional Sabbath service, except in two areas: (1) a few places where alternative, optional readings have been provided (usually another Biblical passage with the same theme but different language), and (2) places where things directly contradictory to Reconstructionist ideology are mentioned. Thus there is no mention of the Messiah, of Jewish Chosenness, or of punishment for disobeying the law - otherwise, the prayerbook is identical to the Orthodox one (The blessing after the reading of the Torah, for instance, still mentions "who plants within us eternal life", albeit with a totally different understanding). Kaplan felt that he was doing nothing revolutionary, but the

Thus folkways and ritual (including prayer) are vital to the happiness and survival of a people, and thus Jewish law, understood properly, becomes the medium from which the folkways of the Jewish people are drawn.

It should be obvious from all that has been said about Kaplan's thought up to this point that there is no way he is going to accept the doctrine that the Jews are a chosen people. To Kaplan, the doctrine of chosenness contradicts all that he believes about the function of religion and the idea of God. The doctrine of chosenness comes out of a completely unreliable source and exists because of a God idea that he simply does not share. Thus for Kaplan the doctrine of chosenness should just simply be discarded. As he explains it

> Despite the tendency in certain quarters to consider ideas as mere by-products of the interplay of blind social and economic forces and to regard reason as a mere rationalization of instinctive passions and desires, we Jews must insist on clear and forthright thought as indispensable. We must strive to overcome the inertia which keeps us chained to a thought-world entirely alien to the modern spirit. There is as much difference between our universe of discourse and that in which our fathers lived before the Emancipation, as between the modern mind-picture of the physical universe and the one which prevailed until Copernicus proved that the earth moves around the sun. Just as, in ancient times, men thought that the earth was the center of the universe, and that their own homes, being equidistant on all sides from the horizon, were the center of the earth, so our fathers, in pre-modern times, regarded the drama of human life as exhausting the whole meaning of creation, and the Jewish people as the hero in that drama, with all other nations merely the supporting cast.
>
> The idea of Israel as the chosen people, must, therefore, be understood as belonging to a thought-world which we no longer inhabit. It fits in with a set of

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Orthodox certainly did - they excommunicated him for it!

> ideas that were congruous and rational enough in their day. But it can no longer help us to understand relations, or to orient ourselves to conditions, as they exist today. The very notion that a people can for all time be the elect of God implies an epic or dramatic conception of history, a history predetermined in form and aim. Nowadays for any people to call itself "chosen" is to be guilty of self-infatuation. It is paradoxical for the Jewish people to be collectively guilty of self-infatuation, when individually so many Jews are guilty of self-hate...the doctrine of the chosen people, whatever validity it may have had in the past, is today utterly unreal.[26]

The doctrine of chosenness simply has no place in modern Judaism, and it must be discarded.

In its place, however, should be put two ideas. The first is the idea of Jewish peoplehood, explained above. The second is the idea of vocation. Vocation is different from chosenness, however, in that all civilizations can share in it. Vocation is simply the already expressed idea that the purpose of society is to help each of its members achieve fulfillment and salvation.[27] All societies should do this, but each does it in its own particular way, through its own particular folkways. These differences have nothing to do with chosenness, but they do make each and every civilization unique.

One last point remains to be made about Kaplan's thought. Like Spinoza, Kaplan believes in freedom of religion. Since there are no grounds (except for whether or not a society is fulfilling it's obligation to it's members) for attributing

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[26] Dynamic Judaism, pp.189-194

[27] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.34

superiority or inferiority to religions, all religions are equal and everyone should be allowed to practice their religion in peace. This applies within religious groups as well as between them. Thus

> The assumption that one's religion is the only *true* religion is as obsolete as that one's country is the center of the world...No religion can be absolutely more *true* or less *true* than another...*The relation of one religion to another is like the relation of one mind to another*. It is a relation of otherness. Each religion, as the self-consciousness of a particular people or church, has its own non-transferable individuality.[28]

> Freedom of worship will have to be interpreted not only as a right to continue one's own form of worship, but also as a duty, to be enforced by law, to refrain from interfering with all other forms of worship and to eliminate from educational texts all offensive or insulting references to religions and people's other than one's own.[29]

> In proposing the conception of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization, I do not wish to convey the impression that it is the only correct and authentic version of Judaism, thereby implying that other versions are incorrect and inauthentic.[30]

> Insofar as we American Jews are necessarily influenced by the currents of American life and thought, whatever Torah tradition we are to foster is bound to reflect one or the other of these four types of religious consciousness with their corresponding conceptions of salvation. Although a bridge of mutual understanding can be built connecting these four types of religious consciousness, there is no reason why we should minimize their differences. There is need, however, to emphasize

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[28] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pg.75

[29] Ibid, pg.86

[30] If Not Now, When?, pg.13. This is not entirely correct however, for from Kaplan's point of view the other versions of Judaism are incorrect, in that they are either supernaturally based or fail to take into account the peoplehood of the Jews. However, Kaplan does defend the right of the other versions of Judaism to believe what they will.

> their equal legitimacy. That is tantamount to saying that religious pluralism is as inevitable in Judaism, or Jewish civilization, as it is in our non-Jewish environment.[31]
>
> The only time there will be a truly universal religion is when the United Nations will become a United States of the World and will evolve a religion to validate its basic humanist aims. Until that time arrives, however, the normal function of each religion should be to enable the collective life of its people to develop that sense of responsibility and that ethical conscience to which we expect the individual human being to live up. Each people or church should be stimulated to foster these traits in its relations toward other peoples and churches and toward every one of its own members.[32]

Religious freedom is a must, for only in an atmosphere of freedom can an individual attain full salvation.

All that remains, then, is an evaluation of what Kaplan has said. On one level, this is very difficult to do, as any analysis of Kaplan's thought comes down to a war between basic assumptions. More so than in any other aspect of his thought, Kaplan bases his justification for continuing Jewish practices on a series of unprovable and by no means self-evident assertions. It is one thing to say that all societies throughout history have developed a religion (a fairly well documented empirical fact) and quite another to say that all Jews should stay Jewish because they were born Jewish and therefore Judaism will help them to achieve salvation best. It is merely an assertion that only Judaism can provide the individual Jew with the means for self-fulfillment. An

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[31] Dynamic Judaism, pg. 101

[32] Judaism Without Supernaturalism, pp.102-103

individual Jew could simply say to Kaplan that they find in Christianity or in another religion (or simply in life as an American, especially if American society were to be made even more free and equitable) adequate means to salvation, and that therefore they do not need Judaism at all. Kaplan might not approve, or even agree with said individual (thinking that Judaism would do an even better job than whatever religion the individual picked), but in the end it would simply come down to a standoff between beliefs. For those who agree with Kaplan, and have a nostalgic attachment to Judaism as he does, what Kaplan says will make perfect sense. Folkways are good, and they do help bring about different states of consciousness in individuals. Public worship is good, for much the same reason. To study the classic Jewish texts is good, because they give insight, guidance and examples for moderns involved in the quest to figure out how to live life. For those Jews who do not agree with Kaplan, however, everything he says is simply homiletics. Kaplan may very well believe that Judaism can serve the function he describes, and it may very well do so for him, but for the Jew who does not feel as Kaplan feels and cannot relate to what he is talking about, Kaplan's explanations are so much hot air. So on one level, evaluation is impossible, as it simply comes down to an internal emotional experience that a given Jew either feels or doesn't feel.

On another level, however, there are internal

contradictions in what Kaplan says. If Jewish ritual and Torah are completely pliable, why is it that traditional ideas must retain an important place? Kaplan has stated that any ritual or understanding that does not fit in with modern sensibilities should be thrown out and that the wisdom of other peoples is equally valid. Why can't the Jews simply create a new Torah? Kaplan's answer is that they would no longer be Jews, but it seems he wants to have it both ways - on the one hand, he wants Jews to have absolute freedom to reconstruct their religion, but on the other, he wants it to remain very close to its traditional form. If Judaism is pliable, why can't it change radically and dramatically from its earlier forms? Kaplan cannot really provide an answer to this question, except that somehow he feels it is wrong to throw out the majority of tradition.

A similar flaw can be found in Kaplan's approach to prayer. Kaplan seems to feel that the traditional liturgy, even though it is untrue, can still be used to promote the we-feeling of the group. He asserts that anyone can enjoy the liturgy simply because of its "poetic beauty", and that a person can easily ignore or reinterpret the inconsistencies between what the liturgy says and what that person believes. At the same time, however, when he presented his God-concept, one of his fundamental assumptions was that what people say they believe has to be coherent with what they in fact do believe. Indeed, this principle forms the basis of his

critique of Orthodox and Conservative Judaism. Yet when it comes to liturgy, Kaplan seems to ignore this principle, arguing that seeing liturgy as poetic removes this problem. But even here he is not consistent, for in his prayerbook he removed passages that he found inconsistent with his ideology.[33] Its as if he's saying that most passages in the prayerbook can be understood poetically but that some simply can't and have to be removed. This may in fact be the case, but its hard to see how any division between "poetic" and "non-poetic" passages can be anything but arbitrary.

And what does he mean to show with his example concerning the dietary laws? What does "capable of striking a spiritual note in the home atmosphere" mean? If the dietary laws are so arbitrary that one can break them outside one's home, how can they be that special? Kaplan asserts that they are, and that they help contribute to positive Jewish life, but he offers no proof of his statement and there are many who would seem to disagree with him (legions of Jews do not observe the dietary laws). If its okay to break them outside the home, why not within the home? What makes the home more special than the neighbor's house? If the dietary laws are meaningful, it seems they should be meaningful everywhere. If they are not meaningful, then it seems they are meaningful nowhere, and that being inside or outside one's home should have little to do with it. In any case, its arbitrary, and while some Jews

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[33] See note #25

may agree, many others may not.

There is also an inconsistency between his Jewish emphasis and his views on freedom of religion. Its pretty clear that Kaplan is a religious humanist, and he makes it clear when he discusses universal religion in the future that that is what he really desires. If a universal religion is so desirable, why not structure Judaism so that its goal becomes the bringing about of this religion, rather than hindering it by having Judaism cling to outmoded folkways?[14] Kaplan seems to be afraid here to follow his own thoughts to their logical conclusions. Kaplan loves Judaism, so he wants to save it, but at the same time he is also a universalist. In addition, if religious freedom is paramount, why must the Jew adhere to folkways (even in a modified form) that are not compelling to him or her? Again, Kaplan seems to want it both ways - all Jews should agree on a "normative" Judaism for the time, one that has behaviors and rituals in common, that all should do, but at the same time Kaplan wants to give each individual freedom. This may in fact be possible, but at first glance it seems difficult.

In the end though, the final question about Kaplan's views is whether or not they will be compelling to the average Jew. Kaplan gives no evidence to support his assertion that

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[14] Kaplan would argue, of course, that universal religion is not possible until there is universal culture, and that therefore the Jews must stick with the civilization most likely to bring them salvation (Judaism) until that time arrives.

it will - given the cultural background out of which Kaplan comes, it is self-evident to him that Jewish culture is important and that if the supernaturalism is removed from it Jews will find it palatable and even meaningful. But what about the Jew who has no Jewish background, and does not really desire one? Will Kaplan's reconstruction be compelling? It seems that there is no problem with regard to parts of Kaplan's thought, for most people should not have too much trouble with Kaplan's naturalistic approach and his socio-psychological analysis of religion. But, when Kaplan begins talking about Toran and ritual, it seems that there are many things one might choose to disagree with. Fortunately, Kaplan has left himself an out as regards this question (which cannot be answered here). By Kaplan's own standards, the test for whether or not Reconstructionism will work is whether or not it does work. If Reconstructionism does what Kaplan says it will do, then proof of its success will be found in a revitalized Judaism. If it does not, then no such Judaism will arise. As things currently stand, it seems as if Reconstructionism has not worked (affiliation rates of Jews in the U.S. are at an all time low), but perhaps it can be argued that Reconstructionism has not gotten a fair shake as yet. In any case, only time will tell.

This then completes the discussion of Kaplan's thought. Like Spinoza, Kaplan argues that the Bible and ritual can only be understood in a naturalistic way, within a functional

context. Again like Spinoza, Kaplan argues that the doctrine of chosenness has no basis and is morally repugnant and that freedom of thought and religion are necessary for human happiness and for meaningful religious expression. Unlike Spinoza, however, Kaplan is not willing to follow some of his ideas to their logical conclusions, and argue for a universal religion for humankind. Rather, he puts that day far off into the future, and holds that Judaism and other religions are still special, insofar as they help their members to live fulfilling, ethical lives and achieve soteria, in a special way that only they can provide for their respective members. Kaplan wants to maintain the importance and uniqueness of various religions, and relies on the social sciences to help him make his point. Whether he was completely successful, only time will tell.

Chapter 10: Final Thoughts on Spinoza and Kaplan

Despite any flaws that one might find in the thought of Spinoza or Kaplan, both thinkers deserve to be commended for their efforts. Both tackled head-on issues that most people prefer to ignore. There is simply no denying that the revolution in the way most people now view the world presents a significant challenge to religion. The naturalistic and scientific approach to the world is here to stay, no matter how much some people may rant and rave against it. The discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud[1] have fundamentally altered the way humanity views the universe, and there is no turning back. The scientific approach to the study of ancient texts has removed any basis for their claim of infallibility and has even raised the question of whether they are remotely useful for the modern day. In fact, taking naturalism to its logical extreme, one can ask why religion should exist at all in modern times. After all, religions (here used in the sense of theistic ones) teach certain doctrines based on the claim that the supernatural Deity who has created the universe has revealed His will to humankind in

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[1] This is just to name the three biggest revolutions in human thought - obviously there have been many other very, very important discoveries. I choose these three as representative because each represents a revolutionary change in the way humanity views itself *vis-a-vis* the universe. Copernicus removed the earth from the center of the universe, Darwin removed humanity from the center of creation, and Freud removed the human certainty that we were in control of our own minds. Each one of these revolutions marks a further step from the teachings of traditional theistic religion.

certain documents that have been dictated to Deity's messengers. If one questions the infallibility of those documents, then the whole structure is thrown into doubt, as it's basis suddenly seems very shaky indeed.

The easy answer then, is to simply throw the whole religious enterprise out - to simply decide that humanity has been the victim of a mass delusion for centuries, and that finally it is maturing to the point that religion is no longer necessary. This is, in fact, exactly what Freud argues in The Future of an Illusion. But for those who maintain, even if only on a purely emotive basis, that the religious enterprise represents something fundamental and important to and for humanity, such a response is entirely unsatisfactory. Religion cannot be thrown out, any more than science, medicine, art, poetry or literature can be. What can be thrown out, however, is religion's focus on theism, and religion can then be made to be coherent with the general world view held by humanity.

It is in this light that the efforts of Spinoza and Kaplan are to be commended. Despite what other people thought of them, they each considered themselves to be deeply religious men, an assessment that I agree with. Both were convinced that the word God had a definite meaning, and that ethics and the quest for soteria had real meaning that could be found in the proper concept of God. Religion was not so much wrong as misguided, and both saw their task as putting

religion back on its proper course and restoring to it it's proper function.

This task was not a simple one, as the preceding chapters have made clear. Both had to battle centuries of inertia and a world view that was fundamentally intertwined with the deepest levels of the human psyche.[2] But both saw it as a necessary task, for both recognized the incoherence between the naturalist world view and religion as it was traditionally taught. Given the choice between discarding the entire religious enterprise or bringing it up to date, both chose to attempt the latter. To succeed in this enterprise, though, both had to establish within a naturalistic framework some of the most important claims theistic religion makes. After all, anyone can be a naturalist, but to be a religious naturalist implies that at least some of the values of traditional religion (ethics, soteria, ritual, etc...) have to be preserved in some form. It's relatively easy to say that there is no God, that ethics are meaningless, etc...but it's another thing entirely to say that the universe is natural but that some traditional religious concepts retain their meaning (even if in modified form).

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[2] This is not the place to go into a discussion of the reasons why people are so attached on a fundamental level to the theistic way of viewing the universe. Many theorists have advanced reasons, and while I personally lean towards Freud's explanation, I am not prepared in this thesis to present and evaluate the many theories that exist. For the purposes of this thesis, it is enough to say that many people, for whatever reason, are non-rationally attached at some primal level to a theistic world view, even if that world view is not dominant in their day to day existence.

The most intriguing thing about both attempts, as far as I am concerned, is how much both have in common. Despite some fundamental differences, and a very different method of argumentation, both largely arrived at the same conclusions. It's as if a naturalistic concept of God and religion automatically imply certain conclusions, despite any differences in methodology.[3] To see how this is so, one need only compare the broad conclusions reached by both Spinoza and Kaplan.

In the first place, religion has only two basic functions. The first is to help people realize the importance and rightness of living an ethical life, and to ensure that they do so. The second is to help people achieve soteria, by whatever name it is called. Both these things, Spinoza and Kaplan maintain, are possible within a naturalist world view. Spinoza proves these points philosophically, relying on his geometric proofs, while Kaplan proves them sociologically, relying on the findings of social science. In both cases though, what is important is the conclusion that this is what religion is for.[4]

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[3] While I am fairly certain that this is in fact the case, I hesitate to draw a universal conclusion as it is based only on a comparison of two thinkers.

[4] The word prove is used here because both Spinoza and Kaplan saw themselves as providing proofs. From a strictly analytical viewpoint, of course, each has only proved their conclusions if one accepts the basic assumptions each has used. Any argument is only as good as it's initial assumptions, and the possible flaws in each thinker's initial assumptions have already been discussed.

This affirmation that within a naturalistic system one can speak meaningfully about ethics and soteria is by no means a trivial one. Such an affirmation is not by any means a given, for there does exist the possibility that ethics and soteria are simply delusions that we wish would be true, but aren't. There are in fact thinkers who have made this claim.[5] But both Spinoza and Kaplan, using a purely naturalistic God concept, have provided a ground for both utilizing uses this concept.

Secondly, as has already been mentioned, both affirm that the term God is a term with meaning, even in the context of a natural universe. Traditional theistic claims about the term God are incorrect, but this does not mean that the term is merely a fantasy conjured up by humanity. The term has a real referent, and therefore can be used to refer to a real something. Spinoza and Kaplan disagree markedly on what that something is, but both maintain it is not merely a fantasy.

Thirdly, both maintain that the something to which the term God refers has real consequences for human life. As mentioned above, those consequences are the religious life, as it is understood by each thinker respectively.[6] Thus belief in God automatically leads (or should lead) to certain behaviors. God has not "commanded" anything, but nevertheless

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[5] Samuel Beckett, when it comes to the possibility of soteria, for one.

[6] In other words, God leads to very real conclusions about the nature and moral implications of human life.

the concept God implies that humans should behave in a certain fashion.

Fourthly, both maintain that religion, by its very nature, must be universal and that freedom of thought is a fundamental human right. These ideas come directly out of their naturalistic understanding of the God idea. Since there is no infallible revelation, there is no infallible doctrine, and therefore people must be free to believe what they want to believe, within the limitations discussed in the chapters on each thinker. No religion can claim a superior truth over another religion, and certainly no religion has the right to impose its doctrine on others through the use of terror or force.

As a corollary to the above, both also maintain that the doctrine of the chosenness of the Jewish people has no meaning in the natural world. Such a doctrine is based on a fantasy, is immoral, and has caused nothing but trouble throughout human history. It is completely incompatible with any naturalist concept of God, and therefore must simply be done away with.

Fifthly, both maintain that Scripture has value. This value is not the value traditionally ascribed to it, but it retains value nevertheless. Whether it is Spinoza's conception that Scripture teaches the true religion mixed in with human imagining, or Kaplan's conception that Scripture represents the Israelites' first strugglings with the God

idea, both maintain that Scripture is special and valuable. Scripture is a natural document, to be sure, but it is also a special document.

Sixthly, both maintain that ritual has value. Even though for Spinoza ritual is simply a means to inculcate obedience, as long as it serves this function it is permissible and even desirable. The danger is when ritual becomes an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Spinoza himself did not personally feel he needed ritual, but he was willing to allow others to engage in it as long as they didn't try to force everyone to agree with them. For Kaplan, ritual has incredible value, as it forms the raw material for peoplehood. For Kaplan, religion without ritual is like rain without water.

The above listing of how much Spinoza and Kaplan have in common is not intended to whitewash the differences between them. There is no question that on many fundamental issues Spinoza and Kaplan strongly disagreed. In fact, Kaplan was critical of Spinoza, for he felt that Spinoza misunderstood the true function of the God idea.[7] Their respective epistemologies are completely different. Each uses a completely different criterion for the truth of an idea, and each uses an entirely different method of argument. Their God concepts have nothing in common except that they both fall into the broad category of naturalism. They each have a

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[7] <u>If Not Now, When?</u>, pg.86

completely different view of necessity (Spinoza is a rigid determinist, while Kaplan is the opposite), and both use strikingly different methods to arrive at their conclusions regarding ethics, soteria, and religion. Nevertheless, despite these different methods, their conclusions are remarkably similar, and this is what the listing above is intended to show.

So why are Spinoza and Kaplan important? Because both provide models for the religious naturalist to study in forming his or her own personal theology. Both systems are complete, from an intelligible concept of God to how that concept forms the basis for an ethical, soterial and religious life. Neither system is perfect, but they don't have to be - their strength lies in the fact that they are complete and thorough attempts to achieve a very difficult task. For the modern Jew (or any religious person, for that matter) who has trouble believing the traditional theistic structure of Judaism, both these systems provide a starting point from which a naturalistic understanding of Judaism can be created. Each system can be adopted in it's entirety, or bits and pieces can be seized upon as each Jew struggles to construct a Judaism that he or she can believe in with a whole heart. Given the crisis facing religion today, and the challenge it faces from the naturalistic world view, this is no small accomplishment, and despite the flaws in their systems, both

Spinoza and Kaplan deserve to be admired for what they have created.

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