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JUDAISM

RICHARD A. COHEN

[Here is a piece that I was commissioned to write for a Dictionary of Existentialism. It was rejected this past month, but Peter wants me to contribute something to our NETWORK, so here goes. You will notice that I take the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre to be the definitive existentialist philosophy. We should not forget, after all, that he was the only thinker willing to accept the label "existentialist," while everyone else shied away from it like the plague. You will see that my reading of Judaism is rather traditional, but in a non-controversial way I think, as one would expect for a dictionary article.]

Judaism is neither an existentialist philosophy nor a philosophy.

Neither is it a religion, if by religion one means the spiritual component within a larger scheme of life. Judaism is rather a total way of life. Because existentialism is also a total way of life, and a way of life essentially different from Judaism, Judaism and existentialism necessarily stand in fundamental conflict. This conflict, however, already points to a similarity: both Judaism and existentialism are total ways of life rather than components within life.

In sharp contrast to existentialism, which is based on the consciousness of individual autonomous or free choice of meaning, Judaism is based on three inter-related foundations which from the point

of view of reflective consciousness are heteronomous: God, Torah and Israel.

Israel means both that the Jew has an essential and special relation to a land, the land of Israel, and that the Jew has an essential and special relationship to other Jews, the people Israel. What is special about both the land Israel and the people Israel is that both are holy, ordained and sustained as such by the one God. Neither of these two essentially Jewish relations, to land and people, nor anything approximating them, nor the holiness which unites them, play any role whatsoever in existentialist philosophy. Indeed, they are excluded in principle by existentialism, which recognizes no such a priori or essential relations.

Torah, too, sharply differentiates Judaism from existentialism. In contrast to the ever present and necessary free creation of meaning which constitutes existentialist consciousness, Jews are “yoked” to a teaching, a Torah, given 3300 years ago by the one God at Mount Sinai to the Jewish people, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Existentialism, like rationalist thought generally, recognizes no more than a fallacious circular reasoning in the Jews’ traditional attachment and submission to Biblical revelation and commentary.

God too, perhaps most obviously, is excluded by the basic posture of existentialism. True, the God of the Jews, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is not the abstract rational God of the philosophers, the God of Descartes’ *Meditations*, say, or Leibniz’ *Monadology*, which latter God both existentialism and Judaism agree to reject. But neither is the one God of the Jews the absolutely mysterious and silent God of a Kierkegaard, Marcel or Tillich. The God of Judaism is both transcendent and immanent to history, intervening unmistakably to free the Jews from servitude in ancient Egypt, revealing himself and his laws unequivocally at Mount Sinai, and planning (however inscrutably for the human eye) for the redemption of the world, marked in history by the people Israel’s exile from and return to the land Israel, and the coming of the Messiah.

These three elements essential to Judaism — God, Torah and Israel — are not only not found in existentialism, they are explicitly denied by existentialist philosophy, based as it is on the capacities of individual

consciousness. Existentialism denies Judaism by insisting on the necessity of an "I choose" inserted between the individual and all meaning, in this case between the Jew and "Judaism." For existentialism the existing individual is nothing other than a free choosing, where existence, devoid of meaning by itself, takes on meaning simultaneously for and from the existing individual. Judaism, then, like everything else, is reduced to a complex of meanings, a complex of meanings which is ultimately dependent on the meaning bestowing acts of the existing individual who freely constitutes all meanings. Not Jews but "Judaism" would henceforth be chosen.

To say that the Jew who is born (or converted) a Jew must choose to be "Jewish," or must choose what it means to be "Jewish," two moves which amount to the same thing in an existentialist perspective, is the death of Judaism. The Jew is by essence chosen, and then makes choices and interpretations on the basis of having already been chosen. Such temporal antecedence or precedence, which is not merely temporal, is the basic and irreversible structure of the transcendence of God, Torah and Israel. If the Judaism of the Jew were chosen from the bottom up, as it were, then the Jew would no longer be a Jew but rather an existentialist. In Judaism an essentially irretrievable beginning precedes the origin. Any reversal of these terms, whether existentialist or otherwise, converts and distorts them both. The Jew becomes an existentialist and the existentialist becomes he who takes choosing to be the radical basis of all else.

Choosing meaning is an activity necessarily available to all human beings, and hence it is an activity with no inner or exclusive bond to Jews or Judaism. The Torah, given at Mount Sinai to the Jewish people who affirmed their willingness to observe it before knowing its contents, would now become a "Torah" and an "observance" whose meanings would be freely chosen, constituted by individual consciousnesses. The land and the peoplehood of the Jews, once and for all time consecrated by God, would now become freely chosen, their meaning freely constituted by each and every existing individual. Nothing about these choices, just as nothing about the constitution of meaning altogether, would be Jewish. Judaism based solely on free choice would be a Judaism radically denied, an

unholy Judaism. Having been chosen is not an accidental quality within the Jewish way of life, it is the essence of holiness, the unconditional condition of God, Torah, and Israel, which exceed the limits of human choice and understanding.

Despite these very great, indeed irreducible differences separating Judaism and existentialism, there are nonetheless elements within the two world views shared in common. First and foremost both world views emphasize the moral responsibility of the individual. For existentialism responsibility is the defining trait of human consciousness, whether this is acknowledged by the individual or not. Judaism is less sanguine. Judaism believes that while moral responsibility is the highest goal of inter-human relations, it is nonetheless not a given, not a structure of human consciousness, not the human condition. Rather it is a character trait that must be developed, in individuals and communities across time.

Both Judaism and existentialism reject the split between mind and body which characterizes much of the Western traditions of Platonism and Christianity. In consequence, both Judaism and existentialism reject any denial of the senses as illusory or evil. For existentialism the sense world is a field of meanings. For Judaism the sense world is a field for individual and communal sanctification.

Both Judaism and existentialism reject any submersion of the individual within a secular or religious collectivity. The focal point of existentialism is the solitary individual, isolated in choice, fully responsible from the ground up. The focal point of Judaism is the individual too, but the individual participating in social and historical relations, in the family especially, but also in the local and global community where Jews and non-Jews meet and interact. As in existentialism, the individual Jew is not reducible to the sum of external relations, but neither, in contrast to existentialism, can the individual Jew be a Jew independent of these relations or as the monadic origin of all these relations.

Jewish freedom is thus both less free and more free than existentialist freedom. It is less free because it is a freedom subject to prior commands whose primacy obligates the Jew prior to the individual's originary

constituting consciousness. It is more free because commanded by the commandments of God the Jew is subject to no merely human will or material condition. Unlike the existentialist, whose free existence is always the absolute originary subject of history, the Jew is both subject and object of history. Because it both acts upon and is acted upon by history Jewish freedom is serious, its hands are dirty yet cleanable. Existentialist freedom, in contrast, though burdened with all the meaning in the world is at the same time light as air, the unperturbed and unperturbable center of the historical storm, incapable of losing its balance or composure.

Despite the sharp differences which separate Judaism and existentialism, a post Enlightenment reform movement within European Judaism, originating and developing in early 19th century Germany and flourishing today in 20th century America, conceives itself in a manner thoroughly consistent with existentialist philosophy. Individual Jews and rabbis of Reform Judaism call "Jewish" what conforms not to the Biblical-historical tradition of divine revelation but rather what conforms to the dictates of universal reason. Whereas hitherto Jews were to be priests in God's service, Reform Jews are each obligated to decide the whole meaning of Judaism for and by themselves. The authority of Jewish tradition serves no more than as a guide — indeed, as but one guide among others — but stripped of its divine or even final authority. Final authority in all matters resides in the conscience of the individual Jew. Judaism, in a word, becomes what each individual Jew chooses. While this reformation developed from out of the same intellectual and social milieu as existentialism, and is doubtlessly consistent with its doctrines, the difficult question for Reform Judaism — for its detractors as well as for Reform Jews — is to grasp in what sense it remains Jewish.

Certain modern Jewish thinkers have been labelled existentialists, the foremost of whom are Martin Buber (1878-1965), Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), and Emmanuel Levinas (b.1906).

Martin Buber's existentialism manifests itself in the distinction he makes between the authenticity of what he calls the "I-Thou relationship" and the inauthenticity of the "I-It experience." Both encounters are necessary parts of human life, but only in the former, in the I-Thou

relation, does the individual attain wholeness. What is important is not what the I encounters, whether nature, persons, or human spiritual creations, but rather how these are encountered. In contrast to the fragmentation of the self in its I-It experiences, in the I-Thou encounter the self enters into an intense holistic meaningfulness. In contrast to existentialist philosophy, however, the I of Buber's I-Thou is not the sole origin of meaning, but shares this function with the Thou. Rejecting the authority of the Biblical revelation, Buber makes I-Thou relationality the foundation of Judaism.

Franz Rosenzweig is probably characterized as an existentialist as much for what he rejects, namely, the impersonal idealism of classical philosophy, especially as found in Hegel, and the vagaries of sentimentalized theology, especially as found in Schleiermacher, as for what he accepts. On the positive side, like the existentialists Rosenzweig does take seriously the living individual who fears death, loves others, and lives, works, ethically strives, and dies in history and community. In contrast to existentialism, especially that of Nietzsche, however, Rosenzweig rejects subjectivity as an adequate foundation for truth and morality. Rather he locates the authentic individual in the communal religious life of — and exclusively of — either of the two great revealed religions, Judaism and Christianity. Rosenzweig rejects classical Western philosophy only in order to accept it on the new basis of traditional Jewish thought and practice.

The French thinker Emmanuel Levinas is perhaps classified as an existentialist almost as much because of his geographical and personal associations as because of his masterful phenomenological descriptions of concrete human life. Though his first book in 1930 influenced Jean-Paul Sartre to learn phenomenology, and though he himself studied phenomenology in Freiburg with both Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Levinas has developed his own distinctive ethical philosophy. Rooted in the concrete, Levinas' thought stands in explicit opposition to Sartrean existentialism. For Levinas the finitude of human freedom does not derive from the limits of the pure activity of consciousness alone. Rather freedom is finite because it is that juncture of activity and passivity

arising out of the self's encounter with the alterity of the other person, the individual subject to other persons, which calls forth from the self a moral responsibility for the other's well being. If this is existentialism at all, it is of a subtler kind than individualist existentialism. Rather than originating in subjectivity alone, the meaning of meaning comes to the self from the other person, the concrete other who confronts the self, face-to-face, and commands the self to its proper moral responsibilities. Levinas argues that this responsibility for the other person encountered face-to-face across dialogue entails a broader responsibility for all others, for all humankind. Just as Buber makes the I-Thou relation the heart of his Judaism, Levinas makes the ethical responsibility of the face-to-face encounter the basis of his interpretation of Judaism.