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MARTIN KAVKA

I am deeply grateful—certainly far more grateful than a brief response such as this can signal—to Zachary Braiterman, Marc Ellis, and Richard L. Rubenstein for having taken the time to respond to my essay. I have learned a great deal from all of them in the past, and I continue to learn from them when reading their responses. I especially thank Professor Rubenstein for correcting some of the finer points in my interpretation of his relationship with Thomas Altizer; I remain in awe of his personal closeness to someone who sees the Holocaust as a cosmic event.

All of the respondents envision a radical theology that is different from what I have offered in this essay, a model that strikes them (albeit in different ways) as too ensconced in a certain contemporary understanding of tradition. Marc Ellis argues that radical Jewish theology must move “outside the rabbinic framework” that has too much pull today in determining which Jewish positions count as normatively Jewish, and move toward the prophetic. Zachary Braiterman agrees with Ellis and argues that a radical Jewish theology must not only move beyond *nomos*, but also goes further than Ellis in the claim that radical Jewish theology must also move beyond kindness and other forms of ethics. Indeed, for Braiterman radical Jewish theology must embody

the monstrosity that lies at the core of all radicality; it is essentially an apocalyptic that can unleash all of the violent energies that have been associated with apocalyptic movements in history. Richard Rubenstein agrees with Braiterman on what radical theology must entail, yet while Braiterman finally must leave radicality behind, Rubenstein embraces it, and in so doing steps beyond Jewish theological tradition and especially the Jewish philosophical-theological tradition to which Braiterman is committed. Jewish radicalism, for Rubenstein, is no longer necessarily Jewish radical *theology*, since the social sciences and political theory are better tools by which to build Jewish power and avoid the horror of a second Holocaust. While Rubenstein's comments are brief, I find it worthy of note that in his self-description as an "accidental theologian" there seems to be a turn away from the call for a religious transformation of humans to "an inclusive vision appropriate to a global civilization in which Moses and Mohammed, Christ, Buddha, and Confucius all play a role" with which Rubenstein ended *The Age of Triage* (1983, 240).

I find all of these options tempting, yet unsatisfying, although I am also well aware that my dissatisfaction is something that threatens to torpedo the sentiment behind the essay. Let me explain.

Like Rubenstein, Braiterman, and Ellis, I find much lacking in the texts of modern Jewish philosophical theology that were handed down to us, texts for us to comment on (and thereby gain tenure) and then pass on to our students. What is lacking is, in a word, historicity. This too is a theme of a subcanon in twentieth-century Jewish thought, including that of Rubenstein, Fackenheim, and Arendt. But in the work of Herberg, Heschel, Rosenzweig, and even parts of Cohen and Levinas, God is described only in terms of transcendence. The task for humans (so says Jewish philosophical theology) is to assent to various divinely ordained practices that are beyond knowledge, and wait for redemption and/or death. This is the purpose of ethical action in Cohen and Levinas, of ritual action in Rosenzweig, and of a generally Sinai-centered view of the world in Herberg and Heschel. Yet how could these figures have *known* to assent? Perhaps there was a chain of revelation from Sinai to them; this is how Moses Mendelssohn defended the need to maintain halakhic observance in his 1783 *Jerusalem*. Yet if so, why would these figures' arguments have had any effect on their audience? If a chain of revelation were authoritative, wouldn't a people have already returned to, or never left, the *mitzvot*?

Yet if these figures were giving nonrevealed arguments for their conclusions, how could they be making arguments about a *transcendent* God? For these reasons, I—along with Ellis and Braiterman, and perhaps to a degree with Rubenstein—read the Jewish tradition for its currents of immanence, for the ways in which human action is understood to be expressing divine power.

This is all that radicality requires: a *coincidentia oppositorum* between heaven and earth. It need not be politically radical. Neither need it be politically liberal, if by that word one means a code of thought determining how a polity organizes itself. But if human action—if *all* human action—expresses divine power, then radical theology is *democratic*, along the lines that Jeffrey Stout has articulated in his 2004 *Democracy and Tradition* and, more concretely, in his 2010 *Blessed Are the Organized*. It is this openness to pragmatism—and perhaps to a conversation that might never actually get around to *doing* anything—that I understand dismays my respondents. For a certain kind of pragmatism that takes norms as always potentially revisable, there is neither the righteousness that leads to successful protest, nor the monstrousness of upending convention, nor a secure knowledge that current immigration patterns in Europe must be stopped.

And yet, I wonder how Ellis and Rubenstein are to convince their audiences. Is it obvious that the prophetic is the “originating core of Jewishness,” as Ellis suggests? Certainly, this is a problematic historical claim. Moreover, this antithesis between prophecy and *mitzvot* seems to me to go against the nature of the prophetic texts in general, which called the people back to the *mitzvot* so that God would remain with them. (If Heschel was a prophetic thinker, then his writing shows the breadth of the prophets’ goals. Take for example, his parting shot to his readers in *Man’s Quest for God*, playing off of B. Shabbat 88a: “The mountain of history is over our heads again. Shall we renew the covenant with God?” [1954, 151].)¹ If Ellis’s invocation of prophecy as something opposed to the covenantal, or the legal, or the rabbinic, is to take hold of his readers—which I hope it does—then why not stress those aspects of the tradition that his opponents hold dear? The category of the “stranger” is a matter of law, after all, not of prophecy. And the first Hebrew word of Exodus 22:21, *kol ’almanah ve-yatom lo’ te’annun* (“you shall not ill-treat *any* widow or orphan”), lexically transgresses the ethnic boundaries that bedevil so much of Biblical law. If radical theology shows that the boundary between heaven and

earth is fluid, it can also show that the boundary between the texts cited by “empire Jews” and “prophetic Jews” is just as fluid, in order to have confidence that the relationship between those Jews will not forever be antithetical. In this way and other ways, it can give reasons for why its views should be taken by the reader as authoritative. The benefit of this approach—to cite tradition *whether one might happen to believe in its divine origin or not*—is that it moves beyond the strictly private realm of the affect of horror, on which Rubenstein places so much emphasis in his response. This is not to say that I do not share at least the broad contours of Rubenstein’s reaction to learning about the Holocaust in 1944. Yet it is the case that what strikes Rubenstein as horrifying and what strikes Ellis as horrifying are different. Why is Ellis sensitive to the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs from their homes in 1948, and to various unjust actions of the Israeli army since that time, while Rubenstein seems less so? Why does Rubenstein seem immune to something like Ellis’s deeply moving story of his friendship with the murdered Palestinian health worker Naela Ayad (Ellis 2007, 70–72)? My point is not to convert either to the other’s position, but to say only that reasons must be given, and in that conversation between the two of them—in which they would make their normative commitments explicit and show which other normative commitments must therefore be included or excluded—the realm of affect would be left behind. Power would cohere with wisdom, as it did for the rabbis.

For Braiterman, this simply is not enough. I am talking about kindness, in his eyes. And in a mark of the kindness that is typical of his friendship, he tells me that as much as he approves of my position, it is by no means radical. Perhaps this is true, but I would deeply hope that it is not. Recently, Braiterman’s colleague Vincent Lloyd was deeply involved in activists’ attempts to get the city of Syracuse to rebudget so that it could find \$120,000 per annum to keep the Ida Benderson Senior Center open for service, to between sixty and ninety people per day. These attempts failed; the center closed, and about half of the seniors once served by the center will now be served by Salvation Army programs.² Would the activists have been successful had they been more apocalyptic, and tried to upend the order of things? Such counterfactual questions cannot be answered. Yet when the mayor of Syracuse, Stephanie Miner, refused a check that would keep the center open for two more months, it became clear that what the activists were protesting

was not simply the mayor's actions, but more broadly, a notion of power that is content to refuse to give justifying reasons for its actions. This has been what "radicals" have always protested. They can only gain power when they see their interpretations of what makes a good polity as being just as well-grounded as (and actually better grounded than) the interpretations of those in power. This ethos, which I take to be the *sine qua non* of classical Jewish discourse about the nature of right authority, is about something more than mere kindness. Radicalism ain't what it used to be, but from that premise there is no reason to infer that it ain't radical anymore. I hope that other self-styled radical theologians might agree. Although I cannot prove this point here, I think that only on such an account of radical theology can radical theologians be effective in the public sphere.

Notes

1. See also, on the relationship between prophets and the *mitzvot*, Fishbane (1986).
2. For a journalistic report of the center's last day, see Kulkus (2011).

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