HAVING SCRUTINIZED in detail the philosophies of Cohen, Rosenzweig, Buber and Kaplan, we turn now to the task of obtaining the necessary perspective in which they may be viewed as a whole. There is little direct influence that these four exponents of modern Jewish philosophy of religion exerted upon each other. Yet, there are certain basic ideas that are common to them all. These ideas are more important by far than the numerous points of difference between them.

Together, the four systems constitute the typical trends of modern Jewish philosophy of religion. Outside of the Orthodox and neo-Orthodox philosophies, there have not been produced other works on the Jewish religion that introduce any new element, or that contain a fundamentally new approach.

Our search for the points of contact between the philosophies of Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig and Kaplan resolves itself, therefore, into an attempt to establish whether there are any basic convictions, apart from Jewish ritual and ceremony, that are common to all great Jewish thinkers. Naturally, we cannot expect sameness or even similarity in the detailed exposition of their systems, since there is no accepted philosophical tradition in the modern world. In the Medieval era, there were many acrimonious conflicts over philosophical propositions, but in the background of those disputes, there was a body of principles, methods, terms and dogmas employed by all who ventured to explore the infinite sea of thought. In our own era, this situation no longer
obtains. There is no “logic” acceptable to all, no unquestioned universally revered philosophical tradition, not even one set of technical terminology. Consequently, it is to be expected that modern Jewish theology will be discussed in the light of diverse philosophical viewpoints and that it will be radically reinterpreted to suit the opinions of the different trends of modern thought. Yet, if Jewish philosophy of religion is to be Jewish as well as philosophy, it must contain certain fundamental convictions, that are really derived from Jewish tradition, not merely artificially interpreted into it.

On the surface, it may appear that there is little, if any, common ground to the four philosophies. Cohen was an extreme rationalist, carrying faith in reason to unprecedented limits. He refused to take for granted any data, other than those of reason. At the base of his system, he placed the astounding assertion that reason is capable of producing its own ideas and developing its own concepts, without the aid of data derived from experience. To be sure, Cohen regarded reason as incapable of obtaining metaphysical knowledge. He insisted on a severe distinction between objective knowledge and metaphysics. But, at the same time, he thought of reason as a timeless world-process, entirely self-sufficient as an instrument of knowledge, containing the seeds of its own infinite development. He scornfully repudiated any form of intuition as a source of true knowledge and he had no patience with materialists and empiricists. The conclusions of “pure reason” alone are true knowledge. Everything else is sheer opinion, or as he put it, a task for knowledge.

Buber, on the other hand, is a neo-mystic. While he differs from the “grand mystics” in maintaining that no union with or absorption into the Divine Being is possible, he is a mystic in the sense that he seeks a direct contact with God. The speculations of reason, “pure” or not, are mere bubbles on the surging waves of reality. Disinterested thinking can only lead to an unreal artificial world of laws, principles and material elements—a world that is largely the product of our own mentality. The only way to approach reality is through the Thou relation. It is “blind” love, not the cold eye of reason that is capable of penetrating to the core of things.

Rosenzweig called himself an empiricist. He was a believer in experience, in the sense that his philosophy was founded upon an experience—the experience of revelation. This experienced intuition was employed by Rosenzweig to reverse the entire course of philosophy.
His refutation of that vast system of thought, which was unfolded by degrees from Thales to Hegel, was based upon our alleged dissatisfaction as individuals with the consolation of philosophy. The individual's fear of death, Rosenzweig asserted, is not allayed by the admonition of the philosophers to contemplate the Absolute. Evidently, he argued, there is something in the nature of man that escapes the net of the philosophy—a something, which reason can only regard as a Naught. Yet, it is a fruitful naught, the matrix of the true human self. Rosenzweig insisted, in substance, that the whole of man must be taken as the test of a philosophy, not his reason alone. Otherwise, he claimed, philosophy is but a half-truth. As contrasted with the German idealistic school, Rosenzweig may therefore be called an empiricist. It is hardly necessary to point out that there is no connection whatever between him and the English empirical school.

Kaplan is a pragmatist. His main interest throughout his writings is practical. Sharing the disdain of the American pragmatical school for the speculations of the metaphysicians, Kaplan is concerned only with establishing those beliefs that have a direct, practical bearing on life. The one belief of religion that really matters is the assertion that there is a Power—not ourselves, that makes for righteousness. This belief helps man to live a noble life; therefore, it is both good and true. A healthy man will accept it and build his life upon it. Apart from this belief, Kaplan regards all phases of human experience as equal in value. There is no Absolute Moral Law, nor any set scheme for approaching the Divine. Human happiness, or salvation, is the ultimate test of any belief or course of action. The bewildering flow of variegated human experience is the final reference and test of all truth.

Notwithstanding these basic differences, there is a core of belief that is common to all these philosophers and—what is more important, common as well to the long line of Jewish sages and prophets, from Moses down. This core of belief, it will appear upon analysis, is the main theme and the real starting-point of all these thinkers, forming the one cornerstone of their respective systems of thought.

We shall approach most conveniently this all-important common ground of Jewish philosophers through an examination of the following question, "what is the source of ethical value?"

As human beings we are prone to pass judgment on all things. We either approve or we disapprove of the millions of phenomena that enter within the range of our experience. In most cases, the reasons for
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our value-judgments are the very evident ones of self-interest. Adjectives such as pleasant, painful, enjoyable, boring, promising, ominous, reassuring, menacing, etc. are obviously conferred on things because of our concern with our own welfare.

Now, the question arises whether the judgments, good and bad, right and wrong, ethical and unethical, are similarly based on subjective considerations, or whether they are derived from our apprehension of the existence of some objective standards. Why do we uncompromisingly approve of charitable deeds and disapprove of acts of robbery, disloyalty and duplicity? Our own personal interest is, in many cases, unaffected by the deeds that we so warmly applaud or by those that we so heartily condemn. Since self-interest is not the source of these judgments and since, furthermore, they are characterized by the quality of objectivity, are we justified in assuming the awareness, on the part of men, of an impersonal moral law in accordance with which the judgments of right and wrong are made?

This question as to the source of ethical valuation is, of course, a very ancient one. It would take us far beyond the limits of our subject, if we attempted even a bare outline of its history. Suffice it to say that a large and respectable group of thinkers, headed by Aristotle, have maintained that all human judgments could be understood as variations of self-interest. Various ingenious explanations have been offered for the apparent objectivity and earnestness of “the voice of conscience.” Generally speaking, these theories may be classified as either materialistic or humanistic. In the former category belong all the explanations which “explain” morality away in the process of trying to understand it. The best known modern representative of this group is Friedrich Nietzsche, whose apology for unbridled brutalitarianism was based upon his purported discovery of the origin of traditional morality in the thwarted will to power of the slave-peoples, primarily, the Jewish nation. In the latter category belong those doctrines which maintain that the ethical insight of human beings is somehow valid, though that insight is really a development of the instinct for self-preservation. The humanists take the civilized conscience of man as their standard of reference. All human interests are good and the ethical strivings of man are of essentially the same value or authority as other human desires and aspirations.

Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig and Kaplan—all agree in rejecting both materialism and humanism. They concur in maintaining that there is something about our experience of the moral law, which cannot be
reduced to self-interest. You cannot analyze the voice of conscience in terms of selfish or indifferent impulses, without proving false to it. The moral law appears in consciousness as an absolute command, spurning all selfish and unworthy motives. It can only be understood on its own face value, as an objective law of action, deriving from the structure of reality. An essential part of ethical experience is the feeling that there is an outside source to our judgments of right and wrong, that the stamp of validity attaches to our apprehensions of the rightness and wrongness of things.

This conviction is not only common to the philosophers discussed; it constitutes the main vantage point of their respective philosophies. While they express this fluid intuition in radically different ways, they agree in founding their systems of thought upon it.

Cohen begins his system with the “basic law of truth” (Grundgesetz der Wahrheit). Truth, he then goes on to say, is the recognition that the two directions of spirit, logic and ethics, must be “pure.” The requirement concerning the “purity” of ethics in turn implies the assertion that the judgments of ethics are intrinsically valid and authoritative. We must not attempt to find the origin of morality in the consciousness of social pressure or in the sublimation and rationalization of some unworthy motive; the “basic law of truth” directs us to treat ethics as an independently authoritative and valid science.

If we should now inquire for the reasons that lead Cohen to accept his so-called “law of truth,” we shall be confronted with the answer that truth is its own final authority. In other words, Cohen’s philosophy of life is based upon an original insight into the objective validity of ethical judgments. To be sure, Cohen insisted that philosophy must not start with anything “given” by experience or intuition. But, then, that insistence was an impossibility, to begin with. Cohen’s initial axiom, the requirement that logic and ethics should be “pure,” must itself be assumed. In the final analysis, then, Cohen’s system is based upon the conviction that our ethical experience contains the seal of objective validity. The concept of God, which logically belongs at the beginning of Cohen’s system, further supports this observation that the intuition of the authoritativeness of the moral law and of its ultimate vindication is the starting point of his thought.

Buber’s “Thou-relation” may also be classified as an ethical experience. As we have seen before, this relation is the concentration of the individual in the feeling of love. Whenever this relation appears,
communion with the Deity, to a limited extent, is established. “The extended lines of relations meet in the eternal Thou; by means of every particular thou, the primary word addresses the eternal Thou.” It is through love, then, that man reaches out toward the Deity. Without doubt the impulse of non-sexual love should be regarded as ethical in character. Many thinkers viewed the feeling of love as the highest culmination of ethical experience. Buber’s claim that reality can only be attained through the Thou-relation, involves, therefore, the conviction that the road of ethics alone leads to God. Ethical thought and life are the response of man to the call of God. “Dialogue-living” is real, valid and authoritative.

The sense of the omnipresence of God, breaking through the “It-world” with overwhelming suddenness and power, is, to Buber, a valid intuition of reality. Yet, this mystical apprehension of God’s presence is attained only through the long sustained practice of concentrating and directing our entire fund of devotion upon the needs of our fellow-men. The Thou-relation is at once, and essentially both, ethical and religious. It is religious not only in the superficial sense of being commanded by God, but in the deeper and more intimate sense of a direct communion with God.

The philosophies of Cohen and Buber appear to be so contrasting in character that it is difficult to realize that they derive from similar intuitions concerning the objective validity of ethical experience. The assurance of objective reality in the feeling of rightness may be expressed in two ways. It may be construed as arising from our awareness of the reign of a cosmic law or a series of laws, according to which the right acts and attitudes in every conceivable situation are determined with inflexible definiteness. Or, the source of validity of ethics may be identified as the Will of God, and the answer in every situation is accordingly sought through a fresh orientation to the Being of God.

The systems of Buber and Cohen represent extreme developments of these two alternatives, respectively. Cohen began with the recognition of the “lawfulness” of ethical judgments. He noted the similarity in development of both logic and ethics and, in his “Grundgesetz der Wahrheit,” he set forth the requirement of “purity” for both these directions of spirit. “Purity” is, clearly, a technical designation for absolutely perfect and self-sufficient lawfulness. While in his “Ethics,” Cohen stressed this aspect of the ethical will, in his later writings, he came to recognize more and more the importance of the reference to God,
which is vaguely implied in the apprehension of ethical values. Buber, on the other hand, chooses to ignore the element of rational lawfulness in ethical experience altogether. The validity of ethical insight is not due to any agreement with a cosmic law, but to the call of the Divine Voice. The reference to God, implied in the Thou-relation, is the one essential element of the ethical, or, as he would say, of the real life.

Cohen's interest is essentially that of cognition. Hence, in dealing with the meaning of the ethical values, he expressed the intuition of their validity, from the viewpoint of knowing, as "truth." In his later writings, Cohen conceived of this basic certainty as the guarantee of God. It cannot be emphasized too often that the concept of God is the most central idea in Cohen's philosophy. Though God is an "idea" and a "methodological concept," He is nevertheless a real Being, unique and transcendent. We must not be deceived by the language of Cohen. Writing from the standpoint of epistemology, he naturally wrote only of ideas and concepts. Still, in his view, God partakes of the processes of both will and thought and is the ultimate Reality. Thus, the apprehension of the validity of ethics contains, with Cohen, a direct reference to God, as the Source of ethics.

Buber's interest is practical. Scanning the wide field of ethical experience, he concludes that the life of ethics cannot be expressed either in cold principles, or in bare maxims. Ethics is neither thought, nor will, nor feeling, but life, the fulness of life, which is all-inclusive. Wherever self-less love is expressed, there Buber finds the perception of ultimate reality and a reference to God, as the final focus of all earthly Thous—the eternal Thou.

The common elements in the basic insights of both Cohen and Buber are, first, the state of mind in which both the good and the true are sought as one. They start with the feeling that these two goals are somehow one, that there is a common core, accessible to the heart of man, which is at once valid and right. In the "Thou" relation, the will to serve God and the will to know God are merged. Similarly, the "law of truth" stands at the borderlines and unites the processes of thought and will. Secondly, there is a sense of the "reality" of the ethical life—that is, the feeling that the good life is in accord with the eternal structure of things. To Buber, the "dialogue" life is the only "real" life and the reward of morality is the knowledge of being real. Cohen, too, sees no sanction to ethics. The good man has the satisfaction of knowing that his life is steered in the direction of the three "pure" processes
of Being. Thirdly, both believe that the ultimate validity of ethical motivation is due to the Will of God. Buber’s thought is expressed in the belief that all love is love of God; every Thou-relation is an address to the eternal Thou. Cohen’s belief takes the form of the principle that the validity of the direction of pure will and its eternity are guaranteed by the God of truth.\(^3\)

Rosenzweig’s basic intuition is similar to those of Cohen and Buber. It will be remembered that Rosenzweig’s philosophy is based upon the experience of revelation. The love of God streams into the heart of man, who is, thereupon, constrained to reply with love to his fellow-man. Rosenzweig believes that human love is derived from the love of God and that the love of man to his fellow-man is an integral link in the eternal triangle of creation, revelation and redemption. Clearly, then, there is no essential difference between Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s versions of the nature of the ethical-religious experience.

Kaplan’s one belief is, as we have seen, the affirmation that ethical rightness and wrongness are rooted in the ultimate structure of reality. God is the Being, Who assures the final triumph of the ideals of mankind. Kaplan does not describe the line of demarcation between the consciousness of ethical and non-ethical ideals, nor does he indicate how God functions in the world. Obviously, if ethical values are to be accorded supreme ontological status in the scheme of existence, they must be conceived as endowed with distinguishing characteristics, which mark them off decisively from the stream of ordinary phenomena. Nevertheless, in spite of his failure to draw such a line of demarcation, Kaplan, in his own way, bases his religion upon the assertion that our awareness of ethical values includes a perception of their objective validity and a reference to God as their Guarantor.

Thus, we see that the four greatest and most typical exponents of recent Jewish thought agree in basing religion upon the perception of ethical values. Though they represent widely differing philosophical movements, these thinkers agree that, at bottom, religion and ethics are one and that the voice of conscience is somehow also the voice of God. In this belief, modern Jewish philosophers continue to cultivate the original insight of their ancestral faith.

Jewish monotheism was derived from the impulses and longings of ethics, not from reasoned speculations concerning the cosmos. For this reason, there was always an impassable gulf between the monotheism of the Greeks, especially of Aristotle, which was based upon the recogni-
tion of the metaphysical unity of the world, and the monotheism of the Hebrew prophets, which was so powerfully epitomised in Abraham's query, "Can it be that the Judge of the whole world will not do justice?" God as the "Righteous Ruler of the Universe" and God as the Source of "Order" in the world are the two conceptions, stemming from Judaism and from Greek philosophy respectively, which theologians, since Philo, have sought to harmonize. Modern Jewish philosophy continues, in the main, to be derived from a heightened sense of ethical values. In all its diverse ramifications, modern exponents of Judaism remain true to the deep insight of Elijah that God is not to be found through the contemplation of the fire and wind of the physical universe, but that the "still, small voice" of conscience is indeed the voice of God.

I have endeavored to present a strictly objective account of modern Jewish philosophy. However, I am conscious of the fact that a completely impartial history of philosophy cannot possibly be written. The essence of philosophy is the description and explanation of things from certain viewpoints and you cannot chart the map of viewpoints without revealing the coordinates of your own thought. For this reason, many philosophers began the exposition of their own systems of philosophy with histories of philosophy, believing that their views of the development of thought were clear illustrations of their own basic ideas.

In order to enable the reader to judge this work for himself, it is necessary that I set forth here the basic principles of my own thought, insofar as they are relevant to the construction of a philosophy of religion.

1. From a logical standpoint, complete skepticism is possible. We may sit down in an easy chair, pass all the data of our mind in review and demand incontrovertible proof from them that they are not all part of one grand illusion. To an aggressively skeptical state of mind, all "proofs" must be further substantiated through "proofs of proofs" and so on, ad infinitum. In the pale light of skepticism, all facts and values assume of necessity the ghostly aspect of unreality. Thought itself is powerless to arrest this process of total dissolution, through militant disbelief, whereby the world and its contents are turned into an ephemeral nightmare. But no such power is required by thought, since the pressure of life itself soon puts an end to the unearthly speculations of the skeptic. Away from
the easy chair and within the seething cauldron of life’s actual problems, no one but the insane will question the reality of the existence of the world or of man. Our “animal faith,” to employ a celebrated phrase of Santayanna, brushes aside with supreme unconcern and ease the vast array of logic so tortuously assembled by the philosophical skeptic.

When we pose to ourselves the question of the ultimate foundation and purpose of existence, we are similarly able in strict logic to adopt an agnostic attitude. Perhaps, there is no eternal Reality behind the flux of phenomena, we may say, or if there be such a Reality, it is to us totally incomprehensible. The best we can do, it may be argued, is to designate that Reality as the Unknowable. This attitude, too, is refuted, not by any rational means, but by the fact that human life and human ideals continue to demand that we orient our lives to some valid goals. As skepticism in regard to the existence of the physical universe is overcome by the pressure of animal impulses, so is agnosticism in regard to the ultimate nature of reality surmounted by the spirit of man which impels us never to give up the search for God, for truth and goodness. Complacent agnosticism is itself a sin against the human spirit. In spite of past failures, it is our spiritual duty to employ our best lights in the attempt, at once human and divine, to know the Unknowable. From this sacred endeavor, we may not fall back in weak despair without losing our title to the crown of human dignity. “For the righteous man falleth seven times and riseth up again.”

If, then, we spurn the deathly refuge of the skeptic, we can only answer the basic question of philosophy, “what is the essence of all things?” by postulating frankly a reasonable assumption or by referring to an intuition of reality. This fact becomes evident through an examination of the nature of logical thought. Deductive logic proceeds from the general proposition to the particular instance. Possessing the major premise, we are enabled, through deductive logic, to note the appropriate minor premises and to draw the correct conclusions. But, the final major premise, how can it be obtained? Here is where thought ends and intuition begins. Inductive logic proceeds from the particular to the universal. Major premises are built up through the consideration of a number of relevant individual cases. Strictly speaking, inductive logic requires the verification of all the instances that are comprised within the major premise. Otherwise, the major premise must still be regarded as unproved. In the case of the question before us, inductive logic is obviously inapplicable. Clearly, then, our views on the essence of things will be based on an intuition. There is room for reason in the criticism
of alternative answers, of course. Thus, I agree with the idealistic criticism of the materialistic position on the ground that the concepts of matter, force, energy, etc. are not valid metaphysical concepts. I further believe that the progress of science has rendered materialism totally untenable. But, when we come to the presentation of a positive answer concerning the essence of things, we are compelled to fall back upon our own deepest convictions.

There is no way of evading this choice of an intuition. Cohen dared to reject all “given” elements in the construction of his system. So long as he was occupied with the problems of logic, he managed to retain this position. But, we have seen, that when he came to construct a philosophy of life, he found it necessary to begin with the “law of truth.” A similar examination of all great philosophers will show, I believe, that no one can build the palace of metaphysics who does not himself provide the cornerstone.

2. The principle which we have to lay down at the base of metaphysics cannot be an arbitrary assumption. The recognition of the dependence of a rational philosophy upon a basic intuition does not grant a general license for all manner of irrational and unproved beliefs. In the history of thought, disappointment in the power of reason led all too often to the silly excesses of romantic subjectivism, which, in its turn, sooner or later, culminated in a neo-obscurantism. No intuition deserves to be taken account of which is not shared by the generality of mankind.

The difference between an intuitional truth and a rational axiom is that an axiom retains the quality of certainty at all times, so that we are never able to doubt its validity. The metaphysical intuitions, on the contrary, appear to us as overwhelmingly and incontestably true only at certain moments. Thus, Bergson’s intuition of the élan vital, Schopenhauer’s intuition of the cosmic Will, Jacobi’s intuition of freedom—all these insights, we are told, come only at rare moments of intense concentration. In other words, the claim of the intuitionists is that knowledge concerning the ultimate structure of the universe can be reached by us, only when we are in certain states of mind. We must assume a certain “existential” attitude, as the German thinkers put it, before we can glimpse reality. At the base of reason, it is what you—the whole of you—are that counts.

3. In seeking to solve the riddle of existence, we face the choice of beginning either with the lowest or with the highest concepts. In the first case, we assume simple elements—Democritean atoms, or electrons, or some general form of matter in motion, or a series of “neutral”
essences. From these elements, we then proceed to explain the emergence of the more complex organisms, through the operation of some simple mechanical rules. In the second case, we begin with an all-inclusive concept, the Absolute, Self, or Reason, or the Infinite, or Personality, and then attempt to reason down to earthly things.

It obviously makes a big difference in the final result, as to whether we begin with the simplest or the most complex concepts. If everything is, at bottom, particles of matter in motion, then the distinguishing traits of mankind appear to be accidental phenomena, mere temporary freaks of existence. We are higher than the universe and rightfully look down upon it. If, on the contrary, we begin with the highest concept, then man’s spirit is more akin to reality than his body. Man looks up to the universe and is the more at home in it the higher he rises to the loftiest spiritual levels of which he is capable. From a strictly logical viewpoint, both assumptions are equally admissible. The final decision must come from an extra-logical source, from the depths of our own being.

4. At this point, the intuition of the objective validity of ethical values must be taken into consideration. In moments of intense moral fervor, we feel that rightness and wrongness are eternally fixed in the scheme of things; that it is not our own personal dictates and impulses that are the source of ethical feeling; that the sense of authority attaching to our ethical judgment is not derived either from the opinions of other men or from the unconscious influence of society; that the things we call “good” and “bad” are similarly designated by the Eternal One, Who stands outside of us and yet dwells within us, speaking through our mouths in moments of great, ethical exaltation.

This intuition is the basis of my philosophy and religion. I believe it, not only because on many occasions it has come to me with dazzling clarity, but, far more because this insight has been shared by the great thinkers of humanity, in particular, by the religious geniuses of Israel. To be sure, an intuition is a fluid state of mind, which cannot as a whole be imprisoned in some hard formula. Every statement in which this intuition has traditionally been phrased necessarily reflected the philosophical background and particular bias of those who have experienced it. We have seen before how beneath the apparently opposed philosophies of Judaism of our generation, there is hidden one group of insights, pointing to the divine origin of ethical values. By seizing upon different aspects of this intuition, philosophers may evolve widely varying world-views, the common source of which it is difficult to discern.

We are concerned with discovering whether there is indeed vouch-
safed to man, albeit admittedly at rare moments only, an intuition of the
eternal validity and of the extra-human source of ethical values. In
advocating an affirmative answer to this query, I point to that long line
of Hebrew prophets, who taught that God, the Creator of the world, to
Whom alone true Being can be imputed, is also the Source of morality.
It is the opinion of nearly all scholars that the Jewish teachers have
arrived at their monotheistic faith through their intense moral enthusi-
asm. Their religion arose and developed out of their intuition of the
absolute authority of the moral law. Among the Greeks, it was Plato who
gave to the world the classic formulation of this belief, in the thought
that the Good, the True and the Beautiful are One. Kant, in modern
times, attempted to formulate in rigid terminology the dictates of the
“practical reason,” which he conceived to be a divine and eternal law,
akin to the timeless principles of logic.

There are many scholars who maintain that the objectivity of ethical
values is due to the unconscious pressure of society. Thus, Durkheim
wrote, “If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is
because the idea of society is the soul of religion.” 7 I do not believe that
consciousness of society is the source of the highest ethical experiences.
The greatest advances in ethical feeling were consummated in the hearts
of those few who dared to oppose the mass-mind. The mob is always
stolid and blind, motivated most powerfully by the least common
denominator of moral feeling. Durkheim’s “idea of society” does not,
therefore, refer to any consciousness of the opinions or wishes of the
actual human society in which we live, but to some vague abstraction.
Furthermore, the conviction, that ethical validity derives from sociologi-
cal forces, if actually believed in, is likely to dispel belief in ethical validity
altogether. For it is of the essence of the highest ethical experience to
feel that the source of its authority stands outside and above the shifting
sands of popular approval.

We do not always apprehend in consciousness the objective validity of
ethical values. It is possible for us to view moral action from an indiffer-
ent, non-moral standpoint. In that event, we see nothing peculiar in the
life of morality, nothing, that is, which cannot be explained on the basis
of ordinary, human impulses and drives. But there are moments in life,
when, no longer skeptical and indifferent, we feel the values of morality
to be supremely real, more real even than our own lives. At such
moments we cannot but regard the materialistic explanations of morality
as utterly false and irrelevant. Most of us, in the ordinary run of things,
take moral values for granted and are not much concerned over them.
When, however, we are suddenly confronted with an outrageous crime, we realize, through the violence of our indignation, that the springs of morality are very deep indeed, streaming forth from some mysterious, divine source.

5. The intuition of objective ethical validity leads directly to the conclusion that there is a Divine Will, operating behind the veil of phenomena. Ethical values are obligatory for us, because they are willed by a Supreme Will. They could not appear to us as objective, if they did not exist apart from human minds. But values can have no existence apart from a Mind which envisages them and a Will, which, in willing them, confers upon them the status of values.

This conclusion may be drawn, no matter in what form the intuition of the validity of ethical values is conceived. In a general way, we may say that intuitional ethics may be divided into two classifications, under the headings, “justice” and “love.” In the former category, ethics is conceived as a system of eternal laws, to which men on earth ought to conform. In the second category, the moralist stresses a feeling of attraction toward an elusive goal. The two different ways of construing the meaning of the ethical experience are illustrated in the philosophies of Buber and Cohen. In either case, the idea of God is found to be implied, in one way or another, in the basic insight of the moral life.

6. On the basis of this argument, I believe that metaphysics should start with the highest concept available to man, that of Personality. We are unable to give a full account of what is meant by God as Personality, any more than we can tell all about our own persons. The term “personality” is the most inclusive in our vocabulary. It includes the elements of matter, spirit, will, caprice, character, emotion, mind and the mysterious unity in which they are all fused together. By thinking of God as Personality, we indicate that from His Nature, all the multiple and diverse phenomena of existence are somehow to be explained.

For a long time, it was believed that philosophers could only believe in a “negative theology.” God had to be defined in negative terms only and every adjective referring to His real positive action could only be taken in a symbolic sense. I believe with Rosenzweig that God is to be conceived as a Living Person, containing within His Being the contradictions of necessity and freedom, eternity and timeliness, matter and spirit, lawfulness and creativity, “midas hadin” and “midas horahmin.” Is not the human self a similar unity of diverse elements? I do not believe that we can possibly hope to improve over the conceptions of the God of Israel in Talmudic literature, where He is pictured as at once “Our
Father,” “Our King,” “Lord of the Universe” and “God of Israel,” “the Place” and “the Merciful.” “Wherever you find the greatness of God, there too you find His humility,” we read in the prayer-book. God as the metaphysical principle of unity and God as the source of ethical values are one or, as the Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev was wont to phrase this truth, “God as the Far and God as the Near is One.”

A conception of God, reached through the process of progressive abstraction, can only be of the most general sort. Hence, it cannot possibly permit such warm attributes of His Nature as the language of true piety and genuine prayer requires. But a monotheism which derives from an intuition of ethical validity leads naturally to that view of God, which does justice to His relations with man and the world. There are in the ethical experience elements of both generality and particularity—the apprehension of a universal law of justice as well as a call to love. There is no reason, then, to decree that God cannot think of or love the individual. I see Rosenzweig’s great contribution to the philosophy of religion in his contention that God does indeed love the individual.

Against the concept of God as Self or Personality, the argument is often advanced that we have no knowledge of any self. The term “self” or “person” is based upon the absence of analysis, it is pointed out. Thus, Hume and more recently Bradley have shown that we have no perception of self. They searched their minds and found nothing which endured through time, apart from the changing flux of mental representations. It was this criticism of Hume, which, more than anything else, led to the abandonment of the concept of a “personal” God, since there appeared to be no real meaning vested in that term. Yet, the argument of Hume is nothing but a quibble; I cannot imagine how, with his procedure of eliminating particular mental data, any other result was possible. McTaggart has shown that we do possess an awareness of self. I feel that, little as we may know concerning the inner unity of personality, the term itself is one of the least equivocal in human parlance.

In any event, it is only as Personality that God can be worshipped. In recent years, the tendency has arisen to think of God as a Process, or a Force, or a Principle. John Stuart Mill suggested that God be worshipped as a power within reality, working steadily for the good, omnipresent, but not all-powerful. This God-force manifests itself especially in the endeavors of mankind to subdue nature and to improve the structure of society. Mill’s reversal to neo-animism was motivated by the apparent insolubility of the problem of evil on the basis of traditional theology. A similar attitude prevails among some of the “Reconstructionists.” Thus,
Eugene Kohn writes, “a God who is the source of evil no less than of good and who is conceived as having the power to save mankind but not using it, cannot command the reverence due to a God.” In this disdainful manner, he brushes aside three millenia of monotheistic piety, offering us instead the view of a God who is only an “aspect of reality.” It is not my purpose to examine in detail views, which have not yet been fully developed. Here, I wish only to indicate that the conception of God as “personality” is alone capable of affording a rational solution of theological problems, while retaining the capacity of evoking the spirit of worship. It is of the essence of personality to unify and to integrate, to make room for the ideal, while yet the real continues to exist.

All so-called “contradictions” in the traditional concept of God revolve round the apparent conflict between the Will of God and His work. Yet, if we are not to be guided by the law of the jungle, this distinction must never be lost sight of. On the other hand, any doctrine which implies a complete severance between these two phases of the activity of God must end eventually in the reduction of the stature of God to that of man.

The solution of the problem of evil, which Cohen proposes, in which suffering is interpreted as “yissurim shel a’havah,” “afflictions of love,” appeals to me most. The point to remember is that the concept of God as the ideal personality presents many aspects, contradictions if you will, sublimed into a higher unity in the Consciousness of God. We may remonstrate with Him even as Jeremiah, complain and protest even as Job, praise and extol even as David. But it is to Him, to Him Who is mysteriously one in all His many-sidedness, that, in our moments of humble piety, we always return.

Conceptions of God as a “power” or as a “process” are altogether worthless for religion. The concept of “power” is derived from the science of physics, where it is employed to designate a potential force. Clearly, then, this term cannot be applied to God, since He must be an actual Being. If God is an actual “force” for the good interacting with the ethically neutral forces, then we should identify the effective causes of everything that is good with God—an obvious absurdity. The term “process” is one of relation, possessing no inherent meaning of its own. It becomes significant only when it is indicated what kind of process is meant.

God, as the Supreme Personality, remains an inscrutable Being. This means for religion, that we approach Him in humble supplication, conscious of our human limitations. In philosophy, this concept of God
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presents innumerable problems, which it is our task as thinkers to resolve. At the base of human thought, lies the feeling of humble reverence. We cannot, as living beings, see the Face of the Lord. Moses, through his humility, came closest to God. There can be no cocksureness in matters of religion, then. Often the restless agnostic comes nearer to genuine piety than the professional religionist. For piety is, at bottom, a seeking and a quest.

7. We have seen before that the awareness of the validity of ethical values comes to us in rare moments, but it is upon the insights gained in those moments that the entire moral structure of mankind is perilously reared. Every generation inherits a certain fund of moral idealism from the accumulated experience of its predecessors. But, the genuinely moral sentiments in our heritage are bound to wane, unless they are periodically strengthened through renewed devotion to the Source of ethical motivation. If worship is neglected and disdained, then, in the course of time, morality loses its distinguishing fervor. It is inevitable that it should then be classed along with other human impulses as merely a form of subtle selfishness, required by "common sense."

The highest ethical experience is a reply to a Thou as well as an awareness of the eternal "rightness" of ethical life. It is this double nature of the ethical experience, which accounts for the ancient controversy, as to the relative merits of the concepts of "justice" and "love" in expressing the essence of the moral life—a controversy, which Acha'd Ha'A'm and many others thought was the main issue between Judaism and Christianity. Really, the religious element which enters into the highest forms of ethical awareness can only be described as love, whereas the ethical motives in ordinary life are better subsumed under the term of "justice." Without this saving grace of devotion to a Person, the element of lawfulness in ethics steadily loses its appeal, wilting away like an uprooted tree. During the first stage of irreligion, the Kantian stage, the moral law appears to be suspended in mid-air. Then, it gradually falls to earth, either as materialism or as humanism—no longer distinctly itself.

Worship is the exercise whereby the attempt is made to keep moral fervor at a high level. In reminding ourselves of our relation to the Supreme Being, we strengthen the ties of ethics which are common to man and to God. Through worship we endeavor to reach that high state of spiritual exaltation, when the reality of the good is experienced most poignantly. To be sure, worship does not always accomplish this result, but, if it achieves this purpose once in a lifetime, it is more than justified as a regular practice.
The intimate relationship between religion and ethics serves to explain why public worship is often so much more inspiring than private prayer. We must unlimber our bonds of oneness with each other, before we can feel the ties that bind us to our Father in heaven. Here, too, we find a major reason for loyalty to the inherited forms of particular religious groups, for people of a like education and background acquire more easily the feeling of unity and brotherhood. Thus, public worship is an ethical duty, for it is our obligation to strive always to be better than we are.

But worship is more than a spiritual exercise for the ends of ethics. It is one of the follies of our time, that support for religion is sought in the fields of sociology and political science with the claim that "social justice" and "democracy" are secure only on the basis of a strong religious faith. Whatever truth is to be found in those claims may be sufficient to justify public support for religion; it cannot serve as a good incentive for religion itself. However, the truly religious require no extraneous motivation. Witness the joy of the Psalmists in their communion with God. Those who have once experienced the pure earnestness and the deep sense of devotion which floods the whole of one’s being, submerging, if only for the moment, all that is petty and unworthy, will not require special reasons for religious worship. They will feel it both a duty and a privilege to pray, even as they feel it a duty and a privilege to do good and to shun evil, for the root of religion and ethics is one.

Is worship a form of communion with the Deity or is it primarily a dedication of oneself to the Will of God? Students of the history of religions know that in the lower forms of religion, worship is an element of secondary importance in the sacrificial ritual. The value of worship is thought to lie in its efficacy as a means of bringing down the Grace of God, in one form or another, to the suppliant. The fact that religious worship has so often been the prelude to bigoted hatreds of all sorts is doubtless due to the circumstance that the element of dedication to a life of ethics, as the Will of God, has been ignored and worship was thought of in non-ethical, ritualistic terms. When religion is not guided to its goal through the voice of conscience, it is liable to sink to the level of black magic and become a vehicle for mass-fanaticism and blindness. On the other hand, the voice of conscience should be recognized as hailing from beyond ourselves, being indeed a faint echo of the mighty call of God to man. Worship, then, is primarily self-dedication and secondarily, communion with the Will of God.

8. The above outline of the philosophy of religion agrees, I feel, with
the innermost essence of Judaism. It remains to point out the obvious truth that there are values to the entire body of Jewish life, over and beyond the truths contained in this exposition. Judaism is a revealed religion. The meaning of this term can only be understood against the background of the long and glorious role which the Jewish religion played in world history. If we believe that the course of human events is directed by the Providence of God, we must look upon our role in the cosmic drama as a Divine command. Rosenzweig’s theory of revelation, expounded at length before, will be found to accord with an enlightened view of tradition and with the ways of thinking of the earnestly critical modern mind.

In recent years, the question has been hotly debated, is Judaism primarily a religion or a civilization? This question is generally so phrased as to preclude a definite answer in favor of either alternative. Judaism is, of course, more than a national civilization. On the other hand, religion is not just a philosophy of life; it is that plus a regimen of conduct intended to saturate all phases of life with the spirit of faith. Thus Judaism is the central, all-pervasive and all-absorbing element of the civilization of the Jewish people.

Judaism may be described as a civilization in the sense of being the treasure of a definite historical group. It is the duty of every group to keep alive for humanity the ideals of its peculiar heritage. Group effort is needed to maintain group-values, especially the values of religion, which are inaccessible to the naked eye—much less, to the naked heart. Not one of the finer treasures of the culture of a group—neither its better music nor its noblest literature, nor its greatest works of art, nor the basic faith underlying its form of government—could be transmitted from one generation to the succeeding one without some form of social organization and common endeavor. For the flesh is weak and the upward climbing of the human spirit requires constant prodding.

To ask whether Judaism be a religion or a civilization is not so much a question of definition and historical study, as it is one of motivation. Its real meaning is, which motive for the maintenance of Jewish life shall we stress, the nationalistic or the religious one? In other words, what is involved is a change of valuation and emphasis. I am opposed to this change for many reasons, principally because I believe that the motive of nationalism is productive of good only when it is kept in the background, as subordinate to the universal ideals of ethics and religion. To close with a word of exhortation, I feel that it is impossible to over-estimate the role which a genuine renaissance of the Jewish religion
could play in protecting the Achilles heel of Western civilization, its gradual loss of a religio-moral basis. Our people in this country and in many other lands are favored with a high degree of culture, and we are very much in the public eye. If we could win our people back to real piety, not merely to passive observance of certain rituals or to weak panderings to popular taste, we shall have unleashed intellectual forces which cannot fail to influence powerfully the entire trend of current events. In the past, our people performed this function for the world. Somehow, the lines of history follow ancient grooves. This, then, is still our task and this our destiny—to labor for the revival of genuine piety among our people, so that we may bring nearer the promised day, when “the knowledge of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.”

NOTES

1. Leo Baeck’s “Essence of Judaism” (New York, 1948) is an excellent and balanced work but it is eclectical in nature. Schechter’s “Aspects of Rabbinic Theology” (New York, 1961) is primarily a historical study. Montefiore’s little book on his philosophy of religion is written in a superficial and practical vein. D. Neumark’s philosophy expressed in his extended criticisms of Cohen in the “Hatorem” have not been presented in a systematic manner in any of his published works. Felix Adler’s ethical philosophy of life does not belong since Adler saw no value in Judaism. For the same reason we did not include the views of those Jewish thinkers who wrote on philosophy and religion in general, without any direct reference to Judaism.


3. Franz Rosenzweig’s in his “Einleitung” finds the common ground of both Buber and Cohen in the concept of correlation. We noted that point in our discussion of Cohen’s concept of God, but, in our view, the similarity is more verbal than actual.


5. Proverbs 24, 16.

6. Already Maimonides in his introduction to the “Guide” speaks of the elusiveness of truth, which flashes lightning-like upon the mind of man, only to give way to total darkness with equal suddenness.


9. David Hume—“Treatise of Human Nature.” E. H. Bradley—“Appear-
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ance and Reality.” McTaggart—article on “Personality” in Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics.
