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THE PROBLEM OF SKEPTICISM

I

What do we do when confronted with an honest skeptic, someone who is not an ill-intentioned scoffer but, on the contrary, strongly desires his doubts to be allayed and sincerely wishes us to convince him of the validity of the basic tenets of the Torah? How do we demonstrate to him that man was created in the image of God, that he has an eternal soul and that he has duties to perform as laid down in the Torah? By what arguments do we establish that ultimately there is justice in this world and that, contrary to appearances, the good is rewarded and the evil punished? And, indeed, by what form of reasoning can it be shown that an Omniscient and Omnibenevolent Almighty exists?

Contemporary Jewish scholarship and literature is in a remarkably creative stage. We have, these days, Jewish publications of high standard in which prominent authors write first-rate articles on a wide variety of topics, except on topics which touch upon the foundations of our faith; those are conspicuous in their absence. On those rare occasions in which the basic problems of "why" are posed, in which the ultimate questions of "how do we know" are raised the suggested solutions are embarrassingly unconvincing and the arguments obviously inadequate.

Often the doubter who seeks reassurance is informed that rig-

The Problem of Skepticism

orous proof, convincing demonstration and decisive evidence in this particular area of inquiry just does not exist and what he must strive for and acquire, is faith. This answer, however, rarely strikes him as particularly reassuring. It is strange, after all, that there are such a vast number of facts on which complete information may reliably be secured with relative ease. We were able to find out, with virtually absolute certainty, the chemical constitution of countless substances, as well as their melting point, conductivity, refractive index, specific heat, co-efficient of expansion, modules of elasticity, etc. Much of this information is trivial, if not entirely useless, but even the part which is important can hardly be said to be vitally important and indispensable to ultimate human happiness. Yet when seeking answers to questions of the highest significance about the existence and nature of the Almighty, answers upon which the meaning and purpose of one's life depend, there is no set of experiments or observation, no method of inference, no rules of inquiry at all that are relevant. We have nothing to rely on but faith—unaided by reason or fact.

II

It is said about a group of Jewish students in Berlin at the beginning of the so-called "Age of Enlightenment," inaugurated by Moses Mendelssohn, that they were greatly troubled by religious doubts brought upon them through their encounter with secular culture. They used to debate among themselves how to resolve these doubts and how to prove the various claims of Judaism, but without success. Finally, they decided that it would be unfair to conclude that no answers existed to their questions without giving the "other side" a hearing. They resolved, therefore, to send one of their members to the Yeshivah in Volozhin — at the time the leading Yeshivah in the world — for a period of two years, where he would study all the sources and consult the authorities and see whether satisfactory solutions to the problems plaguing them were available. Consequently, one of their group — an intelligent and diligent boy — went to Volozhin for two years, where he immersed himself completely into the

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life of the Yeshivah. On his return to Berlin he was met by his friends who eagerly inquired:

“Well, how was it?” his friend asked.

“It was wonderful,” he replied. These two years have been probably the best years of my life.”

“Do you now have answers to all the questions we had?”

“No, I have answers to none of those questions.”

“What, then, was this all for?!”

“But I have no more questions left, either . . .”

There is insight contained in this classic anecdote.

Suppose one day you were confronted with someone, with whose welfare you were concerned and who posed the following question: how do I know that other people have feelings; that they have inner experiences; that they are capable of experiencing joy and pain like myself? Now this individual, being a rather intelligent person, goes on to explain: I know, course, that others behave as if they had inner experiences; that when I step on their toes they moan, when pinched they scream, and when tickled they laugh, but how do I know that these reactions to stimuli are accompanied by mental and emotional processes? It is only in my own case that I know for sure this to be so. On what basis am I to assume the existence of these extraneous processes, which are wholly inaccessible to my senses in the case of others whose behavior can fully be accounted for without them?

I do not suppose that the reader has ever encountered a genuine solipsist (which is the name for people who argue like this) and I am fairly certain he would be quite taken aback and feel at a loss for an answer.

He might attempt to point out: other people surely must have thoughts, feelings and emotions like yourself, because they can be observed to reason and act intelligently and to react emotionally like yourself.

But, as I mentioned, the solipsist we are dealing with is supposed to be a rather intelligent person, thus he will quickly see the weakness of the preceding argument. He will reply: What I observe is that others have brains and act intelligently but not, definitely not, that they have thoughts. To strengthen my point,

The Problem of Skepticism

consider some of the machines which are manufactured these days. Some of these may be observed to have very complex brains made of metal and plastic and to act very intelligently, in many cases with intelligence exceeding by far our own. Yet I will not, for a moment, attribute thoughts to such machines, nor the experience of effort which I feel when working at a problem and the experience of exhilaration which usually accompanies my finding a solution to a difficult problem. Again, I observe that others have hearts, kidneys and nervous systems and that they react to stimuli, but not that they have feelings. As is known, there are some machines which are so built that they scream when stepped upon or when being kicked and give out a laughing sound when tickled, yet it would never occur to me to attribute consciousness to these machines. I am quite convinced that they are devoid of all traces of feeling and emotion and are merely programmed in such a way as to react as if they had inner experiences. What reason have I to believe that all the walking and talking bodies around me are more than just programmed robots?

I do not think the point needs further elaboration; it should be quite clear that it is exceedingly difficult — if indeed not entirely impossible — to show to a genuine solipsist that other people do not merely appear like himself, but do possess inner experiences as well, although these will forever remain inaccessible to an outsider. Fortunately enough, there are hardly any genuine solipsists around. There are, of course, philosophers who, from time to time, raise doubts about matters taken for granted by everyone. This, however, is done in order to illuminate the status of the assumption that other minds and consciousness exist and not because anyone is actually plagued by doubts about their existence. I say fortunately, for imagine if solipsists did exist in large numbers. They would be devoid of all motivation, except fear of retribution, to act ethically. They would refrain from overtly hurting people, but otherwise would completely lack mercy, compassion or sympathy toward the feelings of others, simply because they would not believe that others possessed feelings.

The crucial point, then, is that the doubt about the existence of other minds is like the doubt about the existence of the AI-

mighty: once they are seriously entertained, both are extremely difficult to dispel. The great difference between the two cases is that we have been born and raised in a society where everyone is conditioned to take for granted the existence of inner experiences in others as if it were a self-evident truth. As to the basic tenets of the Torah, however, we have been less fortunate — we are born into a society where many entertain strong genuine doubts about them.

Similarly: how would we deal with a person who was genuinely worried that the walls of the building might melt any moment and, consequently, was in fear that the ceiling was going to come crashing down upon us? I suppose we would try to reassure him by pointing out that the temperature in the room is well below the melting point of walls and thus his fears are entirely groundless. But what if he persists in his worry, asking on what basis do we believe something no one has ever yet observed, namely, that in the next moment the melting point of the wall is going to remain what it has been in the past?

Here again, fortunately, only philosophers worry about such matters and even the philosopher Hume, who was the first to raise this kind of a problem (known as the problem of induction), openly confessed that he only worries about it in his capacity as a philosopher, but, when not engaged in philosophizing, he goes about his daily tasks just like everybody else, completely unworried about the stability of walls, unafraid that the ground may give way or the air ignite and confident that the sun is going to rise tomorrow like it has risen every day so far. At the same time, he knew that there are no logical grounds whatever upon which to believe these things to be true or even to be likely, to any degree, to be true.

Hume, two hundred years ago, was the first man fully to have realized that the usual claim, that our assumptions about the workings of nature have so far worked, is completely beside the point and such a claim merely begs the question, since we are now querying the very supposition that something that has worked in the past is going, or is likely to be going, to work in the future. And it is utterly useless to try and argue, that in the past, the future turned out to resemble the past, for what we

The Problem of Skepticism

are interested in at the moment is, Bertrand Russell has pointed out, not in past futures but in future futures!

However, unlike in the case of the claims of the Torah, all of us have been completely conditioned to accept, unquestioningly, the basic unproven and unprovable principles of empirical reasoning, which generalizes on the basis of instances and draws inferences from the observed to the unobserved. Indeed, the conditioning has been so thoroughgoing that we often blatantly declare that science has produced a vast number of useful results securely established and tested by experience, as if experimental results and observations themselves, without the aid of interpretative rules, articulated any laws of nature and expressly endorsed any empirical hypotheses. The world of pure experience is mute. Only after we have accepted without proof — because there can be no proof — the validity of certain principles which lay down the rules how data are to be interpreted, principles of theory constructed on the basis of observation, that we can talk of scientific hypotheses securely anchored in experience.

In fact, should we ever encounter a real-life solipsist or someone genuinely skeptical about the validity of the basic rules of empirical reasoning, I believe most of us would take the attitude that what the situation called for was not so much the marshaling of evidence and arguments, but therapeutical care. An agnostic with respect to the existence of other minds or the validity of induction would be regarded by us as emotionally unbalanced and who has gotten into an unfortunate and unnatural frame of mind from where he gets a perverted view of the world, incapable of perceiving what should look as self-evident. The psychological causes for the condition of such a person would require looking into and treatment, aimed at restoring his mind to the healthy state in which unfounded phobias and uncertainties are eliminated, would have to be administered.

The story about the students in Berlin intends to convey the idea that the situation, with respect to agnosticism regarding the Torah, is basically similar. To a typical student of Volozhin, agnosticism is an unnatural state of mind, which calls for therapy, rather than arguments. Therefore, a person afflicted with

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doubt should be invited to separate himself from his unhealthy environment and seek cure in sharing the experiences of those who find complete fulfillment and intense satisfaction in a totally committed life in an intellectual and emotional climate in which the tenets of the Torah seem incapable of being questioned.

By saying all this to the skeptic, there is, of course, no guarantee whatever that one is going to succeed in helping him to resolve his doubts. But there is a great deal to be gained from making clear the nature of his difficulties. For it is certain that no solution is going to be found to a problem, the nature of which is completely misunderstood. What I have attempted to do is just this: to define the problem of the skeptic. It is a grave error to think that the special difficulties in establishing the factual claims made by the Torah arise out of the peculiar logical status of these claims, as compared with other knowledge claims. Cognitive claims cannot be established in a vacuum; however, in other domains of knowledge, we are not forced to begin from scratch, for, by innate inclination and continuous conditioning, we accept unquestionably the initial premises and the basic rules of inference, vital for the acquisition of knowledge. The problem with religious propositions is with our innate inclinations and the cultural climate in which we have been brought up and conditioned.