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REDISCOVERING HESCHEL: THEOCENTRISM, SECULARISM, AND POROUS THINKING

Robert A. Erlewine

“[F]ailure to sense the profound tension of philosophical and religious categories has been the cause of much confusion.” Abraham Joshua Heschel¹

While Abraham Joshua Heschel remains a celebrated figure in modern Judaism, one cannot help but notice beneath the veneer of approbation is a consistent lack of appreciation for his thought. In this essay, I argue that Heschel’s rigor and ingenuity has been largely overlooked because interpreters apply categories to his thought which are not only heterogeneous to it, but also whose foundation Heschel’s thought actively tries to subvert. Rather than elucidating a particular dimension of Heschel’s thought which I then critique—an endeavor I believe that scholars have been too eager to undertake—I attempt to clear away some of the ground of past Heschel scholarship which I believe has obscured his work more than elucidated it. In short, this piece is more exegetical than critical. Of course critical assessment is important, but before we can critique it is essential that we properly grasp our subject matter.

I argue that certain basic assumptions about the nature of what it means to philosophize about religion have obscured or obstructed access to Heschel’s work. Heschel’s thought proceeds from a standpoint which is not only foreign to the sensibilities of modernity, namely skepticism and detachment, but he also actively seeks to convert them into awe and wonder. However, Heschel’s critics, as I will show, are unwilling or unable to accept the terms in which Heschel presents his thought, and instead apply categories that are not only heterogeneous to his thought but also and more pointedly, antithetical to it. To begin to correct this situation, I will offer an account of Heschel’s theocentric philosophical theology in order to demonstrate a prominent strategy in Heschel interpretation, namely, viewing his thought as evidence of religiously committed thinking as opposed to disinterested philosophical thought. Next, drawing upon Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, I uncover the assumptions underlying this traditional reading of Heschel as well as offer a new lens for viewing the philosophical and theological task that Heschel sets for himself. Finally, I will conclude by considering a few related objections which I believe are instructive and illustrative of the disconnect between Heschel’s endeavor and the criticisms of it. This essay is not an attempt to assess the accuracy or validity of Heschel’s position or to diagnose potential problems that may face it. Rather, it is an attempt to find the coherence of the work itself, which I argue, scholarship on Heschel has distorted but that contemporary scholarship regarding secularism helps clarify. Indeed, Taylor’s work helps illuminate the problematic nature of much of the criticism leveled at Heschel’s work over the years, offering us a chance to view his work in afresh and less distorted manner.

PART I: HESCHEL AND HIS CRITICS

While Heschel’s most important and influential books were written for popular audiences rather than academics, it would be a mistake to overlook their methodological sophistication. Heschel begins *God in Search of Man* by blaming religion for its own “eclipse” in modernity rather than blaming “science [or] . . . anti-religious philosophy.” He writes, “[r]eligion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.” It has become more of an “heirloom . . . than a living fountain.”² While Heschel is an incisive critic of the state of religion—particularly Judaism—in the US, his statement should not be read as a critique but rather viewed in terms of its methodological significance.³ Heschel is establishing the autonomy of ‘religion,’ such that it cannot be subject to foreign

categories which might refute or invalidate it; if it is floundering, it must be the source of its own undoing.⁴ As autonomous, the category of religion is by no means straightforwardly and easily accessed. For example, Heschel makes it clear that both fundamentalism, which claims to have all the answers, and logical positivism, which evades or dissolves all of the questions, are inadequate frameworks for understanding the complexity of religion. Both stances avoid lived experience and simplify the complexities and paradoxes inherent in religion. Instead, Heschel formulates his task in terms of what he calls “situational thinking,” which he contrasts with conceptual thinking, i.e., philosophy. Conceptual thinking is tied to “knowledge about the world,” whereas situational thinking is such that the thinker herself, her very existence, is implicated in the process of thought. Where conceptual thinking begins with “doubt” and fosters “detachment,” situational thinking begins with “amazement” and “awe.”⁵ Indeed, where many scholars and theologians turn to textual sources, some more or less concrete set of objects for the key to studying and elucidating the meaning of religion, Heschel prefers to explore the consciousness of the pious person, “the natural habitat of faith and piety . . . a soul where the divine is within reach of all thoughts.”⁶

To be sure, Heschel thinks that philosophy has an important role “as a method of clarification, examination, and validation” in the probing of religious thought. However, philosophy is not, or should not be, an end unto itself. Heschel charges that the role of philosophy has been distorted such that it no longer serves as a means or method for clarification and validation but rather is seen as “a source of ultimate insight.”⁷ For Heschel, “[u]ltimate meaning and ultimate wisdom” are not products of conceptual thinking, “are not found within the world but in God, and the only way to wisdom is . . . through our relationship with God. That relationship is awe.” Awe is not emotion, as emotion is within the self, but rather, “[a]we is itself an act of insight into meaning greater than ourselves.”⁸ In awe, as a mode of being-in-the-world, God’s existence is disclosed.⁹ However, God’s existence is disclosed as anterior to one’s self such that the privileged position of the knowing subject is undermined. In awe the subject recognizes something ontologically more primordial than itself, and upon which its very selfhood is derivative. Where philosophy, or conceptual thinking, proceeds from the self to the world, in order to comprehend it, situational thinking allows Heschel to access piety—rooted in awe—as a way of being that transcends the limits of what one, properly speaking, can know. Thus, if one tries to reduce the content of the experiences of the pious person to some more foundational category which we can grasp with our reason, or, if one tries to grasp/reduce religion through textual analysis subject to historical analysis, then one has fundamentally distorted religion. If philosophy is to clarify distortions rather than cause them, its role must be limited. Philosophy and religion are fundamentally different modes of thinking irreducible to one another; Heschel prioritizes the latter.

For Heschel the very orientation of philosophy is problematic when it seeks to comprehend the subject matter of religion. Philosophy, so Heschel thinks, seeks to establish the existence of God via premises whose validity we can evaluate. However, such an approach privileges the knowing subject and turns God into an object that can be known. Rejecting such approaches as wrongheaded, Heschel reframes the traditional philosophical approach to God such that it is God rather than the knower that is emphasized. Heschel states, “‘I believe in God’ does not signify that *I* accept the fact of *His* existence. It does not signify that I come first, then *God*, as the syntax of the sentence implies. The opposite is true. Because God exists, I am able to believe.”¹⁰ It is a confusion brought about by language when one thinks that it is the human knower who affirms a proposition ‘God exists.’ Rather, existentially and experientially, God’s existence, as disclosed in awe, creates the very conditions for one’s capacity to think or experience God’s existence. The danger with the statement ‘I believe in God,’ is that it seems to privilege the self, as if it is up to the self to affirm God’s existence.

Heschel seeks to bring clarity to this confusion that modern modes of thinking about religion, particularly modern philosophy of religion have created. He does this by elucidating ways in which the pious person

lives-in-the-world. Heschel explains that it is “[t]he *grand premise* of religion . . . that *man is able to surpass himself*: that man who is part of this world may enter into a relationship with Him who is greater than the world.”¹¹ For Heschel, this means the profound de-centering of the human subject, the self, such that God is not an object to be known, but rather, “[t]o think of God is not to find Him as an object in our minds, but to find ourselves in Him.”¹² God is the subject, and human beings are the objects. However, this does not mean that human beings are necessarily in tune with God as their ontological foundation. Rather, sensitivity to God must be cultivated. That is, to be genuinely aware of God, the proper attitude and disposition must be present. As Heschel puts it, “[t]he act of thinking about God is affected by one’s awe and arrogance, humility and egotism, sensitivity and callousness.”¹³ Religious life teaches us to cultivate sensitivity to God qua measure and center of meaning. “The task is not to know the unknown but to be penetrated with it; not to know but to be known to Him, to expose ourselves to Him rather than Him to us; not to judge and to assert but to listen and to be judged by Him.”¹⁴ God never becomes an object of knowledge. Religion, then, is not about proper knowledge so much as a set of sensibilities, a way of being and awareness that is different from knowing in its strict sense, where an object becomes disclosed to a knower.¹⁵ Indeed, one must cultivate the right sensitivity and attitudes to experience God.

Heschel’s approach to the philosophy of religion has long troubled critics and commentators. They charge it with circularity. There is no disinterested method of disclosure; to know God one must be conditioned with sensibilities that render one sensitive to God’s presence. One must grant the validity of religious experience if one is to be capable of grasping that the experiences are indeed religious. Even more troubling for critics is his shift from these experiences to God’s existence and God’s absolute ethical demands, from thinking about God to *being thought by* God. This move strikes many critics as too quick, and as methodologically unsound.

Much can be gleaned about the critical reception of Heschel’s thought, and the resistance to his methodology, by exploring Emil Fackenheim’s seminal reviews of two of Heschel’s major works, *Man is Not Alone*, and *God in Search of Man*.¹⁶ While distinct in tone, both reviews show appreciation for Heschel’s voice in a time of relative spiritual sterility in Jewish thought but also raise concerns about Heschel’s methodology. In his review of *Man is Not Alone*, Fackenheim charges that this book is “either too dogmatic or not dogmatic enough.”¹⁷ That is, insofar as Heschel finds it necessary to present arguments he is not relying on the indisputable, i.e. “dogmatic,” nature of theological claims. Rather, according to Fackenheim, Heschel attempts to ground his arguments in “a religious truth immediately perceived.”¹⁸ But if these perceptions are to count as evidence in an argument then one must submit them to disinterested interrogation, something Heschel never does. Instead, they are means of eliding disinterested interrogation and argumentation. Thus the chief failing of *Man is Not Alone*, according to Fackenheim, is that Heschel fails to sufficiently distinguish between faith and reason. If one wants to present an argument then one cannot elide the rigorous requirements of careful reasoning; one can argue that faith is valid, a philosophical claim, only in the terms set by philosophy. One cannot presume the validity of faith.¹⁹

Fackenheim’s review of Heschel’s *God in Search of Man* contains similar concerns about the boundaries between faith and reason, immediacy of experience and the reflection required of disinterested argument. However, this review is significantly more positive in tone; Fackenheim is even outraged at many of the charges being leveled at Heschel by other reviewers.²⁰ Unlike his review of *Man is Not Alone*, where Fackenheim devotes his attention to uncovering methodological problems, in this review, Fackenheim works to solve them. He seeks to come to Heschel’s defense against his critics. Fackenheim’s ‘solution’ to the methodological problems he found in his previous review, and to the critiques being leveled at Heschel, is to draw a distinction between “religiously committed thinking” and “uncommitted philosophical thinking about religion.”²¹ Heschel operates, so Fackenheim concludes, from the vantage

point of religiously committed thinking and is not attempting to make arguments for the judgment of those belonging to the “uncommitted” perspective common to philosophy of religion.

In Fackenheim’s reading, Heschel’s thought reveals an important challenge confronting Jewish thought in modernity: namely, that there are two distinct criteria that mark legitimacy for modern Jewish thought, criteria that are not necessarily commensurable. There is the bar of Jewish legitimacy and that of the modern mind. Fackenheim argues that Heschel’s thought, in contrast to so many of his contemporaries, is “Jewishly legitimate,” but it does not address “the bar of the modern mind,” which requires a different sort of “legitimation.”²² It is precisely this tension between Jewish legitimacy and the legitimacy required by the conditions of modernity that I argue has been highly influential in subsequent critical assessments of Heschel’s thought. For this reason I will quote Fackenheim’s account of it at length:

For the modern-minded it must seem that religious thinking, being already based on a commitment, begs the main question. A mediaeval Jewish thinker could, without qualms, presuppose in his thinking תורה מן השמים and his membership in the נרית. To the modern Jewish thinker these cannot be presuppositions, but the main points in question. And they can be consistently points in question, not to a thinking already religiously committed, but to a thinking which is not yet committed; in other words, to detached objective (rather than religious) thinking. It is non-committed philosophical thinking which must ask what place and significance religious commitments have in human life, and why some commitments are legitimate whereas others are not.²³

Fackenheim seeks to resolve the tension between the respective demands of Jewish legitimacy and the legitimacy demanded by modern philosophy by arguing that Heschel’s work is devotional, work for the already religiously committed by the religiously committed. For Fackenheim, the demands of modern philosophizing do not apply to Heschel because he is only addressing one of the two prongs facing modern Jewish thought. Fackenheim concedes that it may appear to the reader that Heschel’s work is making philosophical arguments, i.e., addressing the second prong, but when this is the case it “is almost certainly a misinterpretation.”²⁴ While Fackenheim’s specific conclusions have not been universally accepted, his framing of Heschel’s thought as caught amidst the tension between religiously committed thinking and uncommitted or detached philosophical thinking has been largely decisive in subsequent interpretations.

More recently, in his essay “Epistemological Tensions in Heschel’s Thought,” Neil Gillman recalls this familiar binary when he explains that when he teaches Heschel, he “can assume two very different poses.”²⁵ For Gillman, there is the “‘*Seudah Shlishit*’ mode” where “Heschel’s words flow through and around me [and] I abandon my critical faculties, I let myself go, and I emerge spiritually enriched.”²⁶ Then there is Gillman’s philosophy professor mode where he “bring[s] to bear the full range of [his] critical, academic apparatus” in order to “conduct a rigorous philosophical inquiry into the statement, to extract its meaning, subject it to dispassionate criticism, evaluate its strengths and weakness” and other such scholarly-critical endeavors.²⁷ It is in this latter mode that Gillman goes on to criticize Heschel for the “thin and tenuous” role of philosophy in his philosophical theology.²⁸ Gillman thinks Heschel’s view of theology is that it “is testimony, one believing Jew’s very personal statement on how he finds meaning in his own life experience.”²⁹ For Gillman, Heschel’s work is, as Fackenheim might say, devotional writing to edify those already devoted. However, unlike Fackenheim, Gillman requires that Heschel’s religiously committed thinking answer to the claims of modern (noncommitted)

philosophy. He writes: “What I miss [in Heschel’s work] is the critical distance which any philosopher must bring to his own claims.”³⁰ Heschel, Gillman concludes, fails to address the most important questions facing any philosophy of religion.³¹

Edward Kaplan rejects this trend of reading Heschel as merely a devotional thinker, as one who eschews philosophy in service to committed thinking, in his essay “Heschel as Philosopher.”³² To be sure, Kaplan concedes that “Heschel is not a conventional philosopher.”³³ Through a rather idiosyncratic analysis of Heschel’s writing style, Kaplan suggests that Heschel employs a strategy that Kaplan terms “phenomenological writing,” a process which “makes tangible the transcendent, radically ineffable event (originating, as it does, from God.)”³⁴ That is, according to Kaplan, Heschel avoids the standard process of giving reasons and analyzing their adequacy, choosing instead to evoke buried memories of the experience of revelation in the reader’s consciousness. Thus, Heschel is a devotional writer, and yet his writing from a place of commitment, makes a disinterested argument. Kaplan makes this explicit at the beginning of his article when he explains that “the strength of Heschel’s procedure is also its basic handicap: the assumption that all human beings have at least once in their lives experienced the momentous reality of God—and have forgotten it. That ‘fact’ can be proven, he contends, only by re-experiencing revelation.”³⁵ According to Kaplan’s reading, Heschel is still presenting an argument, just an unorthodox one that appeals to some criteria behind or beyond ‘mere’ reason. But at the bottom, if the assumption that all human beings “have at least once in their lives experienced the momentous reality of God” is false, then the entire argument is spurious.³⁶

Other scholars step away from the dichotomy between committed and disinterested argumentation, and identify Heschel’s argument as fundamentally tautological. In this vein, and while not without problems, I believe Arthur Cohen’s critique of Heschel’s thought as grounded in a tautology is more adequate than Fackenheim’s, Gillman’s, or Kaplan’s respective accounts. Cohen writes that for Heschel:

God is given with our world: to think of him is already to accept his life into ours, to apprehend his reality is to place ourselves before him. This is but to say . . . that the only way to enter the orbit of faith is to enter it—the only way to apprehend God is to *apprehend him*. This seeming tautology—and it is a persistent and aggravating tautology—underscores the fact that Heschel is essentially disinterested in argument.³⁷

Cohen highlights something important in his claim that “Heschel is essentially disinterested in argument,” or perhaps better, Heschel is *not interested* in argument.³⁸ Regardless, while there is something to this claim, it is only correct on one level and misses the deeper thrust of Heschel’s work. This deeper element of Heschel’s thought, I claim, is to challenge the larger framework in which arguments are able, or are allowed, to take place. That is, Heschel’s theocentric ontology is not the presentation of a particular argument that can be assessed by the standard rules of philosophical argumentation—rules, which as Fackenheim points out, presume a detached and agnostic attitude. Rather, it is a challenge to the very framework which gives meaning and legitimacy to the rules of philosophical argumentation as such.

PART II. POROUS THINKING

Heschel’s unique philosophical and theological voice stems, at least in part, from his distinctive upbringing. While Heschel’s primary impact was felt in the United States, and the majority of his works

were written in English, as Arthur Green points out, “[h]is religious ideas had been largely formed before he came to America, both in the Warsaw of his youth and the Berlin of 1928 through 1938.”³⁹ Heschel was raised immersed in the world of learning of Eastern European Hasidic Judaism destroyed in the Holocaust.⁴⁰ Indeed, while Heschel studied philosophy and biblical studies in Berlin, his religious sensibilities were already at odds with those regnant in his new environment. In a fascinating autobiographical statement about his time as a young man studying in Germany, Heschel explains that to his professors, who “spoke of God from the point of view of man,” the questions that concerned him “could not even be phrased in categories of their thinking.”⁴¹ While Heschel’s subsequent attempts to formulate and explore these “questions,” which by their very nature are recalcitrant to traditional philosophical categories, and have long been understood in terms of the dichotomy between ‘committed thought’ and ‘disinterested philosophical argument,’ I argue that Heschel works to undermine this very distinction.

In recent years there has been very important and provocative scholarship on the nature of secularism which has provided us with a helpful lens with which to explore Heschel’s work anew. Most recently, Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, building on the work of theorists such as Talal Asad and John Milbank, uncovers the historicity and contingency of the categories of the sort of ‘disinterested’ philosophical thinking against which Heschel’s thought chafes, and in whose name he is critiqued or analyzed.⁴² Taylor challenges the legitimacy of such assumptions as if the neat dichotomy between religiously committed and disinterested thinking were a distinction that did not already presuppose a certain set of assumptions such as a particularly modern, western, and therefore secular view of the world. Using Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, I hope to reveal and therefore challenge the unspoken assumptions guiding the critiques of Heschel’s thought. *A Secular Age*, I argue, will provide a lens through which to see, and a vocabulary through which to express, the task which Heschel’s thought sets for itself in a new way.

Heschel’s notion of awe and immediacy with the divine and the controversy around it can be helpfully illuminated by exploring the manner in which Charles Taylor charts transformations in the nature of subjectivity and the sensibilities of individuals and societies in the modern West. In a particularly suggestive passage in *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor writes:

We have moved from an era in which religious life was more ‘embodied’, where the presence of the sacred could be enacted in ritual, or seen, felt, touched, walked towards (in pilgrimage); into one which is more ‘in the mind’, where the link with God passes more through our endorsing contested interpretations—for instance, of our political identity as religiously defined, or of God as the authority and moral source underpinning our ethical life.⁴³

Taylor offers a non-teleological genealogy of the very structures of modernity, of the unspoken conditions or pre-ontology that separates us from our ancestors. In this genealogy, Taylor charts the transition from what he calls the ‘porous self’ to the ‘buffered self.’ In the porous self, “the inside is no longer just inside; it is also outside. That is, emotions which are in the very depths of human life exist in a space which takes us beyond ourselves, which is porous to some outside power, a person-like power.”⁴⁴ The buffered self, however, is self-contained, is distanced and disengaged with everything outside of it. Or as Taylor puts it, with the buffered self “the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind.” The self is now an individual, it possesses agency apart from its environment in a way that was unthinkable for the porous self.⁴⁵ Indeed, gaining mastery over one’s self and one’s environment are part and parcel of the same movement, at least ontologically. According to Taylor, now “[m]y ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meanings of things are those defined in my responses to them.”⁴⁶

The buffered self provides the conditions for social and political orders no longer rooted in cosmic hierarchies to emerge. However, this new order simultaneously “inhibits or blocks out certain of the ways in which transcendence has historically impinged on humans, and been present in their lives.” As a result, this new order situates “the buffered identity in a buffered world.”⁴⁷ That is, with this new sense of self, a new sense of being-in-the-world emerges, one where mysterious and supra-intelligible powers beyond the mind’s grasp no longer have a place, at least in our experiential world.

The relevance of Taylor’s landscape of modernity for elaborating Heschel’s thought can perhaps be seen most clearly in Taylor’s rightly-celebrated account of the “immanent frame.” One of the central claims of *A Secular Age* is that in the “in the West, or perhaps Northwest, or otherwise put, the North Atlantic world” there has been a fundamentally unprecedented development,⁴⁸ what Taylor calls the immanent frame—where one can speak of the natural world, of existence as such, without any necessary reference to a beyond.⁴⁹ Jose Casanova explains Taylor’s work as elucidating “the structural interlocking constellation of the cosmic, social, and moral orders that constitute the self-sufficient immanent frame within which we are constrained to live and experience our lives, secular as well as religious.” That is, as Casanova highlights, “[a]ll three orders—the cosmic, the social, and the moral—are understood as purely immanent secular orders, devoid of transcendence *est Deus non daretur*.” For Taylor, as Casanova helpfully points out, it is not whether or not one continues to hold religious beliefs that constitutes this secular age so much as “this phenomenological experience” of one’s life as delimited by the immanent frame.⁵⁰

To be sure, in accounting for the immanent frame, Taylor by no means thinks he is simply making a case for atheism, but rather he is uncovering the fundamental and primordial conditions in which faith and religiosity might emerge at present in the West, i.e., “the North Atlantic World.”⁵¹ Taylor explains that this world, conditioned by the immanent frame, is a “pluralist world, in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize each other.”⁵² Pluralism is more than simply a diversity of faiths—as coexistence has a long history—rather it is a condition where coexistence now maximizes the fragilizing effects of one’s own relationship to one’s own faith-tradition. Belief can no longer be taken for granted. Taylor suggests that there is no longer any sense of immediacy with religious beliefs. As a result, one can—and indeed almost inevitably does—ask questions such as “why my way, and not hers?” As modern social and political forms of life have fostered homogeneity, adherents of different faith traditions resemble each other more and more, and thus: “We are more and more like each other. The distances which keep the issues between us at bay get closer and closer. Mutual fragilization is at its maximum.”⁵³

If we now return to the discussion of Heschel’s methodology by his critics, it should be clear that their concerns are by no means absurd. His critics, to borrow Taylor’s terminology, are looking for answers that beset the buffered self confronted by cross pressures and mutual fragilization, the self for whom tradition no longer makes a self-evident claim. That is, they seek a philosophical theology that can address the intellectual upheavals of a fragmented and pluralistic spiritual and religious landscape. As Fackenheim argues, in the contemporary world, in order to satisfy the conditions of the modern mind, one must ask “what place and significance religious commitments have in human life, and why some commitments are legitimate whereas others are not.”⁵⁴ For Fackenheim these are philosophical not religious questions. While Taylor does not discuss Jews or Judaism, one could argue that the Jewish community has been particularly beset by cross pressures, and not only on the epistemological level, i.e., why my religion and not hers? Rather, these very modern questions become more existentially pressing when coupled by the liminal space that Jews have and continue to occupy socially and politically as a result of their marginal whiteness, the Holocaust, the challenges of assimilation, and so on.⁵⁵

If we read Fackenheim’s, Cohen’s, Gillman’s, and Kaplan’s discussions of Heschel with Taylor’s work in mind, we see that they seek in Heschel’s work something that can speak to a situation where existential

and religious commitments are fragilized, in a world that is at once more homogenous and (mostly) accepting and yet for these very reasons more threatening for traditional Jewish life than ever. What they fail to recognize is that Heschel does not offer arguments meant to satisfy the conditions of fragilization and cross-pressures, where a disinterested and philosophical stance is seen as necessary since faith is no longer immediate. While Heschel's critics remain within the immanent frame in their critiques of his work, Heschel himself seeks to challenge this very structure on an ontological level.

Heschel, caught between, or rooted in, both old-world Hasidism and western modernity, brings a different sensibility that does not conform or gibe easily with the dominant picture of the secular—religious or irreligious. If we are again to use Taylor's terminology, Heschel is one who still has a foot in the porous self, for whom "[b]y definition . . . the source of its most powerful and important emotions are outside the 'mind.'" ⁵⁶ Taylor's porous self fits with Heschel's descriptions of awe which is not within the self so much as a transformation of the self's way of being-in-the-world, a shift in the very way the self encounters God and the world. Heschel wants to break free from the very condition that Taylor traces with such care and whose dichotomies Fackenheim, Gillman, and Kaplan think are inherent to the modern condition. Rather than work within the confines dictated by this condition, Heschel attempts to undercut its assumptions. For Heschel, the porous self is not a primitive, superstitious relic to be overcome, nor is the buffered self an inevitable, de facto element of the modern world. ⁵⁷ In short, to use Taylor's language, Heschel uses the sensibilities of the porous self to challenge the assumptions of (modern) reason, and thus the buffered self, asking if rather than emancipating the human being from a world of superstition, it has not instead walled the mind up in a trap such that it is no longer in touch with reality.

Heschel's sensibilities are at once modern and antimodern. He rejects the buffered self, but he does not try to retrieve the magical aura of what Taylor calls the "enchanted world" coeval with his (Taylor's) account of the porous self. ⁵⁸ Rather, Heschel offers a retrieval of the premodern porous self, a retrieval that is very much modern in its emphasis on ethical universalism. ⁵⁹ This ethical universalism, however, is rooted not in anthropocentric but theocentric ontology.

In Heschel's work there is a preexisting divine order that ought to guide our lives. This order is not to be discovered through reason, as with the premodern (and indeed, pre-Kantian) rationalists, but rather, this order has much more to do with the self and its orientation to reality. Without wonder, without a sense of the wide horizons which dislocate and decenter the knowing subject, there is an inability to truly judge one's self, to get beyond one's own ego-centrism and pretensions, one's own desire to be deceived about oneself. Or as Heschel puts it, "[m]eaning is not man's gift to reality The essence of thought is discovery rather than invention." ⁶⁰ Indeed, Heschel problematizes modern philosophical sensibilities even more radically, stressing the marginal status of human beings in relation to God. "How monstrous to think of faith as an act of man's giving his expert opinion, as an act of acknowledgment, of granting recognition to God." ⁶¹ For Heschel there is no question that God exists; the danger is that we may be too spiritually coarse and lacking in refinement to recognize it. Thus it is imperative to cultivate a sense of the divine, to make oneself more spiritually sensitive to God's presence. To be sure, there is circularity at work in Heschel's thought, but the vantage point from which circularity is an objection is already one distanced from the sort of immediacy and preexisting order to which Heschel's thought gives priority. ⁶²

The conditions of which Heschel is so critical are tacitly assumed by Heschel's critics as simply the way things are. That they should be presumed as simply obvious makes sense when one recognizes that they are none other than the very sensibilities inherent to Taylor's immanent frame, and thus ubiquitous to the modern West. In their "Editor's Introduction" to *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun point out that Taylor elucidates "how the development of a secular age changed both belief and unbelief, both religious and nonreligious

institutions, the way human beings understood themselves and their natures.”⁶³ In the immanent frame religion and transcendence have not disappeared but they have gradually transformed. According to Taylor, the buffered self exists in a “civilizational framework which inhibits or blocks out certain of the ways in which transcendence has historically impinged on humans, and been present in their lives. It tends to complete and entrench on a civilizational level [an] anthropocentric shift.”⁶⁴ Religious life is no longer so much “embodied” as “more ‘in the mind’, where the link with God passes more through our endorsing contested interpretations.”⁶⁵ Human beings, not God, are the primary agents, and they set the course for their lives in a world beset by uncertainty and a multitude of conflicting ways of life. Religion now becomes a matter of praxis and the affirmation or rejection of certain theoretical principles that can no longer be taken as indubitable. Indeed, the meaning-giving self now has to decide for itself between a variety alternatives competing for its affiliation. In short, the dominant assumptions about religion held both by believers and nonbelievers are antagonistic to the sort of religiosity that Heschel thinks imperative to spiritual well-being. For example, the assiduous observance of halakha can lead to piety but, given this lack of continuity with the premodern spiritual world, it can, and often does, lead to mere “religious behaviorism” instead.⁶⁶

Heschel insists that the experience or sense of God cannot be encapsulated by human thinking, cannot be adequately formulated in creeds or propositions. Western modernity or the secular is problematic for Heschel insofar as it brings with it the buffered self, where human thinking becomes the center of meaning, undercutting the sense of the ineffable. Without the ineffable, the experience of God that de-centers and reorients the self, one is walled up in one’s own mind and alienated from one’s true nature. In sharp contrast to what Taylor would describe several decades later as the immanent frame, where the cosmos and moral world exist self-sufficiently without necessary recourse to transcendence, Heschel insists, “[n]othing exists for its own sake, nothing is valid by its own right . . . All is set in the dimension of the holy. All is endowed with bearing on God.”⁶⁷ Rather than as monads, constructing and construing meaning for one’s self, Heschel emphasizes the disposition of awe where one realizes “that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era.”⁶⁸ Awe radically reorients one, moving one to view one’s self from what one takes to be God’s perspective, where one is a mere creature in a world one did not make, an actor in a drama one did not write. Without this exposure to that which is greater, this de-centering upon encounter with the one true Subject, human beings, who by their very nature are rooted in “dishonesty, egocentricity, and avarice,” believe themselves self-sufficient.⁶⁹ Thus, even if one’s intentions are good, or perhaps better—even if one thinks one’s intentions are good—unless one finds a way to beyond oneself to that which is ontologically primordial, to that which is the foundation of justice, one will always stumble into injustice. This is not an uncontroversial position.

Underneath many of the critiques of Heschel’s thought as insufficiently philosophical lies an unease with the manner in which Heschel de-centers the human subject. Gillman acknowledges a “discomfort” with the notion that God’s existence precedes our knowledge of God. Gillman explains that he is uncomfortable with the “self-verifying” nature of Heschel’s stance, a posture, he charges, which “has lead to more disasters in the name of religion than we can count.”⁷⁰ Similarly, in “The Role of the Secular in Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Theology: (Re)Reading Heschel After 9/11,” Shaul Magid reads Heschel as a cold-war theologian who, in contrast to Godless communism and fascism, “believes that religion and God are the answer to all human travail and that religion should be part of, perhaps even dominate, the public sphere.”⁷¹ Magid, considering the distance between Heschel’s time and our own, turns to figures like Ayatollah Khomeini, suicide bombers, and the Christian Right, and wonders if our contemporary problem “may arguably be not the lack of God but too much God.”⁷²

The worries of both Gillman and Magid, namely that the threat of theocracy and its violence looms in the thought of Heschel, are predicated upon the dichotomy between religiously committed thinking as opposed to disinterested, philosophical thinking. It is clear that both Gillman and Magid privilege the latter form of thinking. Both Gillman and Magid fail to appreciate the ways in which Heschel's theocentrism de-centers not only the subject but also theology and theological authority, such that "all [creedal] formulations and articulations appear as understatements." Indeed, Heschel insists that through religious affects such as awe "our souls are swept away by the awareness of the urgency of answering God's commandment, while stripped of pretension and conceit we sense in the tragic insufficiency of human faith."⁷³ Gillman and Magid are not wrong to see Heschel as firmly committed to a theocentric foundation which is profoundly at odds with dominant modes of secular liberalism, but this theocentrism is not without resources for accomplishing many of the cognitive/civic virtues that such liberal thinkers as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas advocate, with its notion of radical humility that de-centers the subject and challenges dogmatic assumptions.⁷⁴ Heschel's theocentrism hardly promotes a theocracy or religious violence. All theocentrisms are not the same and should not be treated as such.

I believe that we can find the root of much scholarly resistance to Heschel if we look in another not entirely unrelated direction. Fackenheim and Cohen argue that there is a certain lack of sympathy displayed by Heschel's piety. Fackenheim charges Heschel with lacking "understanding for the tragedy of unbelief."⁷⁵ Similarly, in a rather remarkable footnote, Cohen elegantly explains:

There is a difference between the hearer who hears the Word of God and disobeys and hearer who hears only the record of the Word of God and disobeys. The prophetic claim upon Israel in the days of God's public revelation is an order of unqualified claim . . . But today, twenty centuries or more later, our condition is different. We have not heard with our own ears. We have heard only through the ears of history which records and transcribes. We do not trust history: we do not trust transcriptions. We are closed to revelation—not for having heard, but for not having heard. The burden of faith is greater upon us than upon our forefathers, because we must believe without hearing. This is why . . . we cannot finally accept Heschel's . . . theology. Post-Biblical man cannot be shamed into belief. We deserve more compassion—if we do not deserve it from God, we insist upon it from theologians.⁷⁶

What is this "tragedy of unbelief" or this being "closed to revelation" that Fackenheim and Cohen speak of? Are these commentators not highlighting that modern sensibilities block out, or prevent one from attributing veridicality to affects such as awe and radical amazement? If they are to operate with intellectual integrity they must treat awe and wonder as mere affects within the self, not as conduits to transcending the self. As long as one remains a buffered self, as long as one is rooted firmly in the immanent frame, Heschel's thought, as evocative and challenging as it is, remains fundamentally alien, the force of its claims recalcitrant.

Heschel, a figure who dwelt between Eastern and Western Europe, appeals to sensibilities that his Western audience finds strange and foreign. Cohen's footnote testifies in a striking fashion to an inability to experience the immediacy of awe, to a world closed off to a sense of transcendence that Heschel's pious man exemplifies, a sensibility he simply lives. From their buffered perspectives, torn by commitments to Judaism but lacking the immediacy which Heschel's work seeks to cultivate in its

readers, it is not so much a lack of rigor but an inability to escape the fragilized, cross pressured nature of the modern mind which make Heschel's work so hard to fathom. In Cohen's words we see a frank confession of the inability to read Heschel in his own terms. This inability—which is lamented to no small degree—stems from the conditioning of the immanent frame, its sensibilities and limitations. As Cohen notes, the “burden of faith” is terribly heavy for the modern Jew who is “closed to revelation.”

However, much has changed in the intellectual landscape since the 1950s and 1960s when Fackenheim and Cohen were writing their commentaries on Heschel. It is by no means clear, indeed it is doubtful that in the wake of poststructuralism and the so-called “return to religion,” that the assumptions and sensibilities which formed and structured the horizons of meaning of Fackenheim and Cohen as well as other early commentators on Heschel, continue unabated for contemporary generations. And yet, contemporary critics continue to operate with their categories, without investigating whether these categories remain valid. To be sure, few today possess the sense of piety that Heschel sought to cultivate in his readers, but many of the formal and structural obstacles that have distorted Heschel's work can now be cleared away to allow for a fresh hearing.

Notes

In many ways this article grew forth from a comment Susannah Heschel once made in a conversation with me. While her thoughtful comments provided the impetus to think about A.J. Heschel's work in a new way, this particular argument and whatever errors may inhere in it are entirely my own. I would also like to thank Molly Robey and Martin Kavka whose insightful suggestions greatly aided the revision process of this essay.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York, 1955), p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ I thus disagree with Arnold Eisen when he claims that Heschel is primarily emulating authors such as Schleiermacher or Samson Raphael Hirsch such that “[i]n order to win his readers’ trust he had to demonstrate that he shared their alienation from religion as it was normally encountered” (“Re-Reading Heschel On the Commandments,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 9, No. 1 [1989]), p. 4.) I suggest instead that we read Heschel's comments as attempting to preserve the autonomy of religion as a sphere unto itself irreducible to philosophical or scientific categories rather than to as an attempt to win over his audience. To be fair, Eisen acknowledges Heschel's *sui generis* notion of religion, but he reads this more as a rhetorical strategy than as tied up with methodology. Of course, Heschel was genuinely critical of contemporary religiosity. See Abraham Joshua Heschel and Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY, 2011), pp. 102–167, for many of Heschel's critical statements about Judaism in the U.S. and his writings for the instruction of teachers, rabbis, and cantors.

⁴ Heschel clearly follows thinkers like Rudolf Otto and G. van der Leeuw who find in religion a category *sui generis*. To be sure, this approach has numerous critics today, perhaps most eminently Russell T. McCutcheon. As important as this line of criticism is, it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the questions and challenges it raises for Heschel's thought.

⁵ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁹ Without going too far afield, it is important to acknowledge that Heschel is deeply engaged with the phenomenological tradition, and works such as *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, CA, 1965) make clear that he is deeply informed by the work of Martin Heidegger. Where Heidegger, at least in *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY, 1996) ontologically distinguishes, indeed

privileges, certain modes of being-in-the-world such as anxiety, Heschel's thought makes a parallel move with dispositions or moods such as awe and wonder. Of course, Heschel's theocentric agenda is deeply antagonistic to Heidegger's own basic commitments. However, Heidegger and Heschel are both quite critical of the transcendental subject; While I disagree with many of his conclusions about Heschel and the public sphere, Martin Kavka gives a highly insightful account of Heschel's relationship to phenomenology, and the relationship of phenomenology to God in his thoughtful essay, "The Meaning of This Hour: Prophecy, Phenomenology, and the Public Sphere in the Early Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel," in *Religion and Violence in a Secular World: Toward a New Political Theology*, ed. Clayton Crockett (Charlottesville, 2006), pp. 124–125.

¹⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York, 1973), p. 190.

¹¹ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 33. 190 Robert A. Erlewine

¹² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York, 1951), p. 127.

¹³ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 111.

¹⁴ Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, pp. 128–129.

¹⁵ Here Heschel's phenomenological grounding is clear. I am by no means the first to notice this. For the most thorough account, see Lawrence Perlman, *Abraham Heschel's Idea of Revelation* (Atlanta, 1989); Also, see Kavka's astute account, "the Meaning of That Hour."

¹⁶ Emil Fackenheim, "Review of Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion," *Judaism*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1952), pp. 85–89; Emil Fackenheim, "God in Search of Man. Abraham Joshua Heschel. A Review," *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1960), pp. 50–53.

¹⁷ Fackenheim, "Review of Man is Not Alone," p. 86.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Perhaps the subtitles of *God in Search of Man* and *Man Is Not Alone* lead to some confusion in this arena. The subtitle of *Man Is Not Alone* is "A Philosophy of Religion," and the subtitle of *God in Search of Man* is "A Philosophy of Judaism." In these subtitles, Heschel is clearly using "philosophy" in a different sense than the sort of "philosophy" he is critiquing. Perhaps this polyvalent use of "philosophy" served as a source of confusion for his contemporaries and later critics who attempt to read him as a traditional philosopher, or at least as someone who is attempting to operate within such a framework.

²⁰ We see Fackenheim's outrage at the reception of Heschel's work, in the following statement. "[F]or like everyone else who tries to rethink and relive Judaism in our time, Heschel is open to criticism on points of detail. What is truly astounding is that a considerable amount of criticism should have come from professed religious quarters; that it should have attacked Heschel's work as a whole; and that a prominent point of criticism should have been—of all things—that Heschel's work is not representative of authentic Judaism. One is left speechless by suggestions that Heschel's insistence on a supernatural, self-revealing God must be an import from Christianity. Or that his 'mysticism' is un-Jewish, reactionary and calculated to lead us all into all into fascism." "God in Search of Man," p. 50.

²¹ Fackenheim, "God in Search of Man," p. 51. To be sure, this distinction, once introduced continues throughout the rest of the review.

²² Ibid., p. 51.

²³ Ibid., pp. 51–52.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁵ Neil Gillman, "Epistemological Tensions in Heschel's Thought," *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. 50, Nos. 2–3 (1994), p. 77.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 78.

- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 79. The passage in full reads: “What a thin and tenuous line philosophical speculation must tread! Is it indeed possible to be critical, to examine and validate religious claims, without assuming, at least for methodological purposes a dispassionate stance that, to the believer far too readily becomes antagonistic.”
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 78.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 81.
- ³¹ It is interesting to note that prior to this essay, Arnold Eisen sees Heschel making a similar evasion of philosophical argument in his celebrated work, *The Prophets* (“Re-Reading Heschel,” p. 10). However, in recent years Eisen’s tone in his writings on Heschel has become significantly more positive, counting Heschel “as one of the greatest” Jewish religious thinkers of modernity (“Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (2009), p. 4). Eisen’s more recent essay does not address the challenges raised in his earlier piece.
- ³² Edward K. Kaplan, “Heschel as Philosopher: Phenomenology and the Rhetoric of Revelation,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 21, no. 1 (2001), 1–14; In n. 1, Kaplan explains that this essay began as a response to Gillman’s “Epistemological Tensions,” p. 9.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 1.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 10.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 1.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 1.
- ³⁷ Arthur Cohen, *The Natural and the Supernatural Jews: An Historical and Theological Introduction* (New York, 1963), p. 244.
- ³⁸ Ibid., I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who pointed out Cohen’s problematic use of the word ‘disinterested,’ which carries a connotation that seems to belie his complaint regarding Heschel’s unwillingness to engage in philosophical argumentation.
- ³⁹ Arthur Green “Three Warsaw Mystics,” in *Rivkah Shatz- Uffenheimer Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem, 1996), p. 36.
- ⁴⁰ Arthur Green helpfully traces the mystical and Hasidic elements of Heschel’s work in “Three Warsaw Mystics,” pp. 1–58. See also the remarkable “Introduction,” by Susannah Heschel in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (Santa Fe, NM, 1998) and Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven, CT, 1998).
- ⁴¹ Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God*, p. 95.
- ⁴² In their “Editor’s Introduction,” to *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, a companion piece to Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun point out that Taylor’s “emphasis on the secular as having a positive social, historical and ethical shape—rather than as a default condition denoted by the negation of religion—links Taylor to another school of contemporary thought about secularism, largely developed under the influence of Talal Asad.” (Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun. *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA, 2010), p. 25.
- ⁴³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), p. 554. 192 Robert A. Erlewine
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 36.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 38.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 38.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 239.
- ⁴⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 1.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., the idea of the ‘immanent frame’ is a major theme throughout the book, but it is discussed with particular lucidity on pp. 543–544.

- ⁵⁰ Jose Casanova, “A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight?” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, p. 265; cf Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *Varieties of Secularism*, p. 9.
- ⁵¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 1.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 531.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 304.
- ⁵⁴ Fackenheim, “God in Search of Man,” pp. 51–52.
- ⁵⁵ One persistent, and quite legitimate, critique of Taylor’s work has been its narrow focus on Latin Christendom and failure to acknowledge Christianity’s others within the West and those beyond the West but with whom contact informed the shape of the West. That being said, it would be a mistake to dismiss this work for this shortcoming, as significant as it may be. For one such critique, see Saba Mahmood, “Can Secularism Be Other-wise?” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, (eds.) Warner, Vanantwerpen, and Calhoun, pp. 282–299.
- ⁵⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 38.
- ⁵⁷ As I mentioned, Taylor does not present a teleological account in which the buffered view neatly replaces the porous self. By no means am I trying to cast Heschel in an antagonistic role with Taylor, as Taylor’s work is surveying the landscape of our current sensibilities and how they came to be. It is in light of his work findings that much of Heschel’s objects of criticism can be better understood.
- ⁵⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 300.
- ⁵⁹ In this my argument dovetails with Green’s description of how Heschel reconfigures Kabbalah to fit with modern, ethical sensibilities. See Green, “Three Warsaw Mystics,” pp. 46–49.
- ⁶⁰ Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 29.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., p. 166.
- ⁶² I do not wish to claim that this matter is settled, that Heschel’s work is now vindicated philosophically. Rather, what I am attempting to demonstrate here is that Heschel is attempting to reorient his reader’s sensibilities in such a way that this objection itself is cast as part of a worldview that is itself being called into question or at least relativized.
- ⁶³ Warner, Vanantwerpen, and Calhoun, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, p. 25.
- ⁶⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 239.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 554.
- ⁶⁶ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 320. I would like to thank Susannah Heschel for bringing this point to my attention.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 415.
- ⁶⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Holy Dimension,” in Abraham Joshua Heschel and Susannah Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York, 1996), p. 308.
- ⁶⁹ Heschel, *Passion for Truth*, p. 228.
- ⁷⁰ Gillman, “Epistemological Tensions,” p. 80.
- ⁷¹ Shaul Magid, “The Role of the Secular in Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Theology: (Re)Reading Heschel After 9/11,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2009), p. 145.
- ⁷² Magid, “The Role of the Secular,” p. 144.
- ⁷³ Heschel, “No Religion Is an Island,” in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*, p. 122.
- ⁷⁴ One might argue that the capacity for religion to serve as a source for reflexivity and de-centering of one’s self and culture has not been sufficiently explored by secularist theorists of the social sphere like Ju’rgen Habermas. Habermas’s recent work addressing religion has not, but perhaps could, find in such modes of faith a parallel source for addressing such epistemological conditions demanded by modernity. Indeed, numerous theologians and philosophers of religion

are turning to faith as a source of epistemological humility when it comes to religious tolerance. For example, see Adam Seligman, *Modest Claims: Dialogues and Essays on Tolerance and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IA, 2004).

⁷⁵ Fackenheim, “Review of Man is Not Alone,” p. 86.

⁷⁶ Cohen, *Natural and Supernatural Jew*, p. 248. I would like to thank Martin Kavka for bringing this passage to my attention.