

- 25. Ibid.
- 26. Ibid., 89.
- 27. Walsh, *Metaphysics*, 77.
- 28. Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, 89.
- 29. Kaplan, *Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, 91.

Kaplan and Process Theology

Jacob J. Staub

No aspect of the teachings of Mordecai M. Kaplan has provoked more powerful reactions than his theology, and no aspect of his writings is in greater need of amplification and clarification. His discussions of God have attracted a faithful and passionate group of followers. For them, the naturalistic idiom of Reconstructionist theology has led to a commitment to a life of Jewish practice and belief long after faith in traditional teachings has been lost. On the other hand, Kaplan's critics have accused him of everything from fuzzy thinking to atheism and have resorted to the dubious assertion that his forays into theology have removed him from the realm of authentically Jewish discourse.

The question of the Jewish authenticity of Kaplan's theology will not be the primary subject of this paper. Those who understand and accept Kaplan's vision of the evolving nature of Jewish civilization *and* those who have troubled to study the history of Jewish thought know full well that any attempt to extract a single, consistent, "authentic" essence from all of the various theological formulations by Jewish teachers through the ages is a perilous task indeed.

Jewish history presents us with such unwieldy paradoxes as the dominance of the uncompromising naturalism of Maimonides's negative theology on one side of the Pyrenees precisely when, just several hundred miles away, the Hasidei Ashkenaz were reacting to the First Crusade with a theology that denied the existence of

natural law and portrayed God as involved in the most particular of occurrences. At the time, neither side would have admitted the legitimacy of the other's most beloved beliefs; and yet, subsequently, Jews incorporated aspects of each side into their theologies. No flourish of rhetoric nor any homily on the unchanging nature of Jewish monotheism can convince the serious student of Jewish intellectual history that Moses' conception of God was identical to that of Rabbi Akiva, or that the theological speculations of the *yordei merkavah* were more or less faithful to the biblical and rabbinic ideas of God than were the logical arguments of Sa'adia Gaon or the midnight auditions of Joseph Karo.

The fact is that Jews' descriptions of God have varied widely based on variations in their personal temperaments, their individual and collective experiences, and the cultural influences to which they have been subject. In light of this, the most appropriate and useful evaluation of the theology of any Jewish thinker, Kaplan included, will deal with its self-consistency and its ability to provide a convincing framework within which Jews can pursue Jewish lives. It is the experiences of Jewish people in history—and not a rigidly defined conceptual standard—that render the final verdict about whether a given theological approach provides a meaningful system for Jewish living.

Applying these criteria to Kaplan's writings, even the sympathetic reader is struck by the unsystematic nature of Kaplan's theological reflections. Kaplan, of course, would have been the first to admit that he was not primarily engaged in metaphysical speculation. He believed that the proponents of what he saw as the outmoded system of traditional, eastern European beliefs were doomed to fail in their attempts to convince modern, Western Jews of the ongoing relevance of those beliefs. In seeking to adapt the Jewish heritage to the radically unprecedented situation of the twentieth century, he enthusiastically adopted the then-current philosophy of pragmatism as the vehicle for that adaptation.

Thus, wedded as he was to a pragmatic search for the means to human salvation that admitted that we can know only what we experience, Kaplan focused on our intuition of transcendence, on our experience of a process that impels us to strive for life-abundant, and on our sense that the cosmos is in rapport with the human

quest. We know the presence of God, he affirmed repeatedly, when it is manifest in our lives and behavior—and not via abstract metaphysical speculation nor through faith in the witness and teachings of preceding generations.

Given this pragmatic approach, it should not surprise the student of Kaplan that he never embarked upon the construction of a systematic portrait of the nature of the universe and God's relation to it. He attempted to chart questions of transcendence by mapping the interiorities of concrete human experience—the only source, according to the pragmatic approach, of valid knowledge. Those who mistake this approach for Kaplan's denial or avoidance of the "objective" reality of God fail to understand Kaplan's approach to objectivity itself. For him, abstract theories about God's nature were epistemologically suspect; in relating God's reality to the concrete realities of the human quest for salvation, he sought not to undercut but rather to bolster his readers' belief in God.

In the process of articulating his prescription for how we can make God manifest, however, Kaplan was led—against his will, it sometimes seems—to make affirmations that exceed the limits of the certainties of human experience. That God is the creative life of the universe, the sum of forces making cosmos out of chaos; that God is immanent insofar as all parts of the universe act upon each other and is transcendent insofar as the whole acts upon each part; that reality is so constituted as to enable people to achieve salvation; that God strives to redeem us and impels us to pursue self-transcendence; that God is a cosmic process that includes and exceeds all other physical, biological, chemical, physiological, and social processes—these are metaphysical assertions that beg for clarification and systematization. As statements of faith, they require no demonstration. But if they are to be persuasive and compelling—the stuff by which purposive lives can be lived—they ought to be shown to be self-consistent and reasonably related to the reality that people encounter in their lives.

In fact, however, such Kaplanian images of God are far from being self-evidently consistent, nor do they obviously accord with the experience of reality many people have. As poetic metaphors, they masterfully evoke images of a greater divine force coursing through the natural world. They do not cause a contemporary Jew

to stumble over assertions of supernatural divine intervention or of a royal, personal figure sitting above, controlling events according to a divine plan. Thus, they are effective in opening up glimpses of transcendence to contemporary Jews whose secularized upbringing has left no room for a supernaturalistic belief in God. Unless these metaphors, however, can be interwoven into a more consistent system that sustains the individual through the vicissitudes of his or her life, the moving poetry of communal prayer will end up being discarded in the intensive-care units of hospitals and the conference rooms in which ethical decisions are made. Some of the questions raised when one assembles Kaplan's assorted statements about God are as follows.

1. What does it mean to say that the divine creative life of the universe includes all other processes and that it organizes cosmos out of chaos? How does God relate to the world? Is God manifest everywhere—in nature's malevolent aspects as well as in its benevolent aspects? In human failures as well as in human successes? Sometimes Kaplan speaks about God as the sum; at other times, he contrasts the divine forces that make for cosmos with the chaos that has yet to manifest divinity.

Thus, the reader of Kaplan is left to wonder whether the God process is an all-inclusive unity, or if it is one complex of processes among others. Such an ambiguity has obvious consequences for the Kaplanian worldview. One might choose to assume that he sought to portray in a contemporary idiom the paradox that much of preceding Jewish thought has rested on—namely, that God is both within the world and beyond it. Even within that paradox, however, we still want to know whether the divine embraces the bad with the good, or if the divine is an ally in our quest that struggles as we do with that which is not yet divine.

2. On what ground does Kaplan stand when he affirms that the basic human hungers are essentially or primarily noble? While it is pragmatically and homiletically effective to stress our quest for freedom and justice, for example, in order to cultivate those qualities, such a strategy ought to be based on a consistent truth-claim. On what credible basis, however, can Kaplan regard evils, as he does, as no more than obstacles that cannot resist the divine cur-

rent, that are only real in the sense that darkness is the absence of light?

The work of psychologists in this century—not to mention the clear emergence of radical evil on the world political scene—would lead us to the contrary conclusion: that people's ignoble impulses are every bit as real as their striving for nobility. Thus, the God that we may come to know through our experiences of transcendence may be pragmatically assumed to be real, but consistency would require the admission by similar means of the existence of evil forces—either on which God has no effect or which in some sense should *also* be regarded as divine.

3. On what basis can we be confident that the so-called divine processes are more than human projections upon a universe that is value-neutral? When the reality of God is experienced in luminous moments, we can affirm the reality of that experience. Unless one can account, however, for occasional or intermittent flashes of divine illumination in terms of a symbolic picture of the universe that accords with that experience, luminous moments do not in themselves render God persuasively present as a real force in the world and in our lives.

To a great extent, the predicate theology that has been developed by Harold Schulweis clarifies Kaplan's thought by identifying divinity with the divine predicates and by denying the reality of a divine subject. For Schulweis, God is manifest when divine things happen, and there is no divine subject to whom we may attribute the existence of evil. If he is read as constructing a midrash on Kaplan, Schulweis can be seen to have eliminated all of those problematic passages in which Kaplan implies the existence of a subject-process that must be correlated with all of reality. Since, as Schulweis argues, God-language is necessarily and admittedly a metaphorical description of a transcendent reality beyond accurate description, it is best to focus on those occasions and actions that make the divine manifest. In doing so, one avoids becoming mired in metaphysical excuses for the apparently imperfect universe in which we find ourselves.

Schulweis (and Kaplan) stand on firm and traditional Jewish theological ground in asserting God's ultimately ineffable nature

and in concentrating rather on those moments in which the influences of a God who is beyond definition can, nevertheless, be located. That was the position of Maimonides, who ruled out all positive attributions to God except attributes of divine action, and who defined attributes of action as qualities that we attribute to God because the effects of God's causation are such that, if they were caused by a human being, that person would be said to possess those qualities. Both the Maimonidean and the Kaplanian positions maintain a startling level of agnosticism about God's essential nature, while firmly insisting on attributing qualities to God that are derived from human experience.

Thus, predicate theology is no more vulnerable to the charge of avoiding a direct discussion of God's nature than is Maimonides's negative theology. The comparison with the Maimonidean approach, however, is instructive in illuminating other problems in Kaplan's and Schulweis's approaches. Whereas the Rambam developed a coherent portrait of the universe through which each attribute of action could be viewed as a partial and ultimately inaccurate reflection of God's unity, Kaplan did not. In clarifying Kaplan, Schulweis also highlights the weakness of Kaplan's theological approach. In what sense, we ask, can we affirm the unity of the divine predicates, and from where does that unity derive? Without an affirmation and description of the reality out of which the predicates emerge, without a God that is at least a functional noun, we are left at most with a power or a set of powers not ourselves that can be of assistance to us in our quests. However, that falls considerably short of providing us with the confidence that our efforts will succeed in the face of an apparently indifferent universe.

The difficulties inherent in providing a coherent portrait of the cosmos in which the divine predicates are supposed to function can be seen, however, to follow directly from the incongruity of overlaying a twentieth-century conception of God upon a traditional, premodern metaphysics. In reducing God's direct role in the governance of the world and in questioning the literal truth of biblical and midrashic images of God, medieval Jewish philosophers, such as Maimonides, exaggerated the chasm between the divine and human realms. God, for them, was not only beyond human knowledge; God was also utterly and absolutely other. For Maimonides,

any literal attribution of a human quality to God was idolatrous. Attributes of action derived from human experience could be applied to God and thus serve as a model for human imitation, but they were not to be believed literally. Instead, knowledge of and communion with God was to be acquired through the cumulative negation of every nondivine association with God.

Such a radical distinction between the divine and the human is not Kaplan's or Schulweis's objective. The God they seek to describe is one who reflects twentieth-century images of power and sanctity. Such a God does not rule majestically from on high as an absolute, mysterious monarch but rather reflects more modern notions of empathy and alliance with humanity. The premodern otherness of God was located in images that reflected the social and political values of their time—values that are no longer current. God as stern but merciful father; God as potter molding creatures without restriction; God as the source of the otherness that humans experience in a world impermeable to human understanding; God as the perfect, self-contained One unconcerned with and unaffected by anything else—these are not the images the theologians of our day seek to recover. Thus, when we seek the source of Kaplan's powers or Schulweis's predicates, we should take care that we are not assuming the necessity of positing such a source to be radically other. Rather, the coherent portrait of the cosmos required to ground their theologies is to be found in the work of process theologians of this century.

Beginning with an affirmation of the *ultimate* value of this world and using human experience as the basis for the construction of metaphysics and theology, process theologians, such as A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, have provided a radical alternative to the classical ways of speaking about God. Whereas classical "monopolar" theology (in Hartshorne's term) exalts an utterly transcendent and ultimately impassive God while denigrating this world, Hartshorne's "dipolar" God is very much the paradigmatic supercase of what this-worldly Jews would affirm as perfections. God is portrayed as absolute in existence but relative in actuality, as abstractly independent but actually radically dependent on creatures.

In process theology, the reality of experience-events is primarily

social and sympathetic. Becoming includes and generates being. This is a perspective that reflects a modern, posttraditional understanding of reality. It systematically explains how everything is contained within God without being controlled by God (since perfect power is not coercive) and how God can be said to be cognizant of, and in sympathy with, all existent things. It does much of Schulweis's work for him by locating actuality in concrete events and by defining abstract experience and personhood—human and divine—as no more than the constant threads that successive events share in common. It provides a way to speak of God as a process on which we depend and to which we can relate, without abstracting God from the experienced universe.

By affirming that reality is progressive and that God—as the perfect process—is ever changing and growing, ever surpassing past perfections in the innovations of the universe's component parts, and ever providing us with new possibilities for enjoyment, process theology provides the appropriate metaphysical correlate to the affirmation of the *evolutionary* nature of Jewish civilization. Even the perfect divine predicates need not be hypostatized as unchanging and everlasting. The reality of God and its manifestations are themselves subject to an ongoing, continuous process of becoming. There is thus divine warrant for opposing the status quo, for continually striving to surpass the accomplishments of the past and present.

Whitehead's vision of the function of culture is also a promising way to develop Kaplan's understanding of the necessity for Jewish civilization. Not all possibilities are available at each moment of creative synthesis. One's civilizational heritage opens up certain possibilities for enjoyment that would not otherwise be available. Experiencing the concrete reality of Jewish sancta allows for a creative synthesis that builds upon the enjoyment and insights of others.

Such a theological framework represents a radical departure from both classical Jewish theology and from the popular beliefs on which most Jews have been raised. It requires a wrenching reorientation to begin to think of God as in perpetual process, involved in and substantially affected by the undetermined unfolding of concrete events—and not only as a removed "governor" decreeing from above.

Yet the framework of process theology reflects much of what many contemporary Jews actually believe about the empathic and progressive nature of reality and makes coherent much of what Kaplan chose to say more casually about the nature and reality of God.

Nevertheless, however useful process theology may be in elaborating Kaplan's theology and in resolving, through dipolarity, many of his apparent contradictions, it must be noted that the works of Whitehead, Hartshorne, and Schubert Ogden are not entirely harmonious with the thrust of Kaplan's vision. Kaplan's God-process is one that is only described as making for the good, for life-abundant, for cosmos over chaos, for the strength that we need to overcome adversity and create community. He refers to God as the sum of all processes in the abstract; but when he cites instances of divine manifestations, he is selective. For this reason, Schulweis's predicate theology can be said to explicate him fairly.

This is not identical to Hartshorne's God, who is said to provide present experience-events with possibilities, acting to persuade or lure entities to make the most beneficial choices but acting primarily through a radical sympathy for all things, no matter how they choose to self-create. In constructing an all-inclusive metaphysics, process theologians seem bound to include everything within the God-process—evil as well as good—so that God's all-embracing love, as the sum of all concretions, extends to all humans, for example, equally. The all-empathic God is not only nonjudgmental; God also makes no guarantees that any goal will ever be reached. To the contrary, God is radically dependent on us to create the future over which God has no control and which will actually constitute God.

Thus, Schulweis is not entirely wrong when he claims that Hartshorne's "neoclassical subject theology" offers us an amoral God. The morality of the God of process theology is that of love, knowledge, memory, and empathy. The God who is the source of all possibilities is no more the cause of good than evil, no matter where the divine sympathies lie. Perfect power, according to this way of thinking, allows sympathetically for freedom and innovation—as the highest form of morality. This is primarily a God of love rather than of justice, a responsive and dependent God whose present and future reality is conditioned by and includes the mem-

ory of all of our deeds. It is not the God of Isaianic or Kaplanian righteousness. It is a God who is present not only when we actualize Schulweis's predicates but when we fail to do so as well.

Thus, the use of process theology to explicate and systematize Kaplan's thinking must necessarily be selective. A faithful explication will not allow for an empathic, nonjudgmental God who cares about us but who does not, in some sense, represent the imperative to seek righteousness. In firm Jewish tradition, the Kaplanian perspective chooses to identify the divine with a prophetic and rabbinic ethics rather than with an all-inclusive embrace of the totality of all things—even at the expense of an account of the world that makes complete sense.

It remains an open question, then, whether such a perspective can be made to harmonize with the move from the classical monolithic God to one of dipolarity. That is, it remains to be explored whether a process theology can be developed that both locates the divine at both poles of the continuum and yet preserves the God of righteousness. Those who seek to reduce the classical chasm between God and creation, who understand ultimate reality as process rather than stasis, may have to choose between an absolutely empathic and an absolutely righteous God. Kaplan, when he is interpreted through the lens of process theology, can be seen never to have made that choice, leading to many of the contradictions mentioned in this essay.

That choice, however, should not be assumed to be inevitable. Our rabbinic and medieval predecessors notwithstanding, the identification of divine perfection with immutability is anything but obvious. Indeed, one suspects that many have held on to that equation for God after abandoning it with reference to nondivine reality because of the fear that the floodgates of chaos will be opened by an admission that ultimate things change, too. In fact, a continual process of *teshuvah*, of turning and returning on a lifelong journey toward God, may prove to be more firmly grounded in the imitation of a God who is in a continual process of divine unfolding—a God of becoming *and* being, a God of absolute responsiveness and dependence—than in the imitation of a God so perfect as to be beyond our ability to know. Cosmologically and spiritually, our ancestors' world revolved around a fixed center. It is our challenge to adapt

their wisdom to the very different images of the external and internal world current in our day.

If there is a compelling reason to follow Kaplan in seeking alternatives to traditional, supernaturalistic theology, it is not, as Kaplan claimed, that people find it unconvincing. It is clear that many do find it convincing. It is rather that our affirmation of secularity, of this-worldliness, of the ultimate value of lives lived in this universe requires a theology that locates God in and of this world—as the source of our efforts at self-integration and social liberation. A transnaturalistic process theology is no more demonstrable than a supernaturalistic one; it does promise, however, an articulation that correlates with the confidence that we profess in the purposes of our lives.

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