

SHUBERT SPERO

The Good, the Right, and the Morality of Judaism

Over a century's worth of analyses of moral language has yielded at least one generally agreed upon proposition—namely that two of the most frequently-used terms of approval in the English language, “good” and “right,” when used in a moral context, designate two related but very different aspects of moral experience. Both are essential to the moral experience, yet they are so distinct that ethical theories are often categorized according to the emphasis they place upon one or the other of these terms.

The object of this paper is to determine 1) whether there are equivalents of these terms in biblical and rabbinic Hebrew and whether they similarly incorporate the important differences that philosophical analysis has discovered between them and 2) whether understanding these nuances enable us to better appreciate biblical and rabbinic texts. Our working assumption is that a pair of words in two different languages and cultures, although separated by vast stretches of time and space, can convey similar conceptual content and perform the same linguistic function when the referent of the language is the same distinctive human experience. In our case, we are looking at the *moral* experience. Hence, while we may use different phonemes, the reality that they attempt to describe, the raw experience that they attempt to articulate, is essentially the same.

I

In ordinary English discourse one can properly use the word “good” (and its opposite, “bad”) in many different senses. For example, “a good knife”

SHUBERT SPERO is the Irving Stone Professor Emeritus of Jewish Thought at Bar-Ilan University and resides in Jerusalem. His latest book is *New Perspectives in Theology of Judaism* (2013).

means a knife that cuts well, “good children” can mean that they do not cause trouble to their parents, “a good year” described by a business-man means a profitable one, and “a good movie” means at least an enjoyable one. The word “right” (and its opposite, “wrong”) is similarly context-governed. It might mean “correct” in describing the answer to a problem in mathematics or it might mean “appropriate” or “fitting” in the sense of socially proper. Nevertheless, no matter how secondary the particular use, the primary meaning that is always present is that both “good” and “right” indicate approval on the part of the speaker in the sense that the object of this adjective is in some appropriate sense beneficial, favorable, or useful (while the very opposite is true with regard to “bad” or “wrong”).¹

However, a study of the use of these terms in ordinary everyday conversation reveals certain differences between judgments of good/bad and those of right/wrong. The latter carry with them a tone of specificity and finality—one might even say a hint of objectivity, pointing to some outside standard. This can be seen when the terms are used in such contexts as medical diagnoses, mathematical equations, or directions. To be judged “wrong” is to have been judged an unequivocal failure. All this is lacking in the vagueness of good/bad. Furthermore, in judgments of good/bad (“the movie was good,” the weather is “bad”), one is grammatically predicating something about the object. In right/wrong judgments (“the answer is wrong”), while the grammatical form is the same, there is a certain finality to the term “wrong.” The “wrongness” of the answer grows out of a relationship to some outside standard. These nuances find expression in a noticeable difference when reacting to a challenge to one’s judgment. In the case of good/bad, such as “the movie was good,” one may respond “because I enjoyed it.” This is acceptable because good/bad judgments do not convey anything more than approval/disapproval. However, if challenged in a judgment of right/wrong, a subjective explanation such as “this is just the way I see it” would be considered an inadequate justification, since the very terms right/wrong imply a judgment made in relation to some identifiable criterion.

1. The derivative use of the word “right” (opposite “left”) to indicate position or direction emanates from its use to indicate the side of the human body on which is situated the hand that developed, in most people, as the favored hand in all activity. Hence, in training the young, it becomes the “right” hand to use, a handy way to indicate position and direction. That is to say, it is the side or direction corresponding to one’s “right side.” As is well known, the use of “right” and “left” in politics to indicate “conservative” or “liberal” is the result of where particular members of the House of Parliament were seated relative to the speaker.

There is another difference between the terms. Good/bad allows for comparison and gradation. Things can be “very good” or “not so good.” One thing can be “better than another.” However, strictly speaking, right/wrong does not allow for such gradation. One cannot be more right than another.² There is an element of either/or to the term “right,” as in the case of the term “truth.”³

I shall later attempt to show how the distinctions seen in the use of the terms “good” and “right” in ordinary discourse help to elucidate certain biblical and rabbinic texts. But first, for a broader perspective on the difference between “good” and “right” as seen in the philosophy of ethics, let us consider a brief, broad-brush historical sketch.

II

Since the days of the ancient Greeks there has been a line of thinkers who have viewed the pursuit of ethics as the rational search for the supreme good, i.e., “an end of action which is desired for its own sake while everything else is desired for the sake of ‘it.’”⁴ This supreme intrinsic good is not the good for any particular person, but rather the good for the human qua human—that is, something that answers to that unique quality that makes our species “human.” After comparing human beings to the other species, these thinkers, most famously Aristotle, concluded that this quality is the human’s rational faculty. Just as the supreme good for a plant is to be under conditions that enable it to live, grow and blossom, to fulfill its very nature, so the supreme good for a human being is to achieve full realization of one’s potential as a social and rational being.⁵ Clearly this kind of argument is based on the assumption that humans are similar to plants in the sense that a human’s supreme good can be determined simply by an examination of the human’s biological nature. Is a human being nothing more than a rational animal?

In more recent times, thinkers with a more empirical bent have argued that the “good” for human beings is what they themselves value most. However, rather than determine this by a poll, they decided, a bit

2. In moral philosophy, one might deem a supererogatory act as more right than another right act, but I am speaking of ordinary discourse.

3. Of course, if the matter being judged is a complex one, one might say, “You are partially right.”^s

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a19.

5. See H.B. Veatch, *Rational Man* (Bloomington, 1966).

too hastily perhaps, that the feeling of wellbeing and self-satisfaction that comes at the end of the fulfillment of any desire, was the goal and the basis for the motivation from the very beginning. Thus, no matter whether the act is buying a ticket to a ball game, hearing a lecture or concert, deciding to become a scientist, marrying a certain woman or attending a religious service, the end goal is always to experience pleasure or to eliminate or prevent discomfort. Even if true, this proves only that each person seeks his or her own happiness. Nevertheless, this did not stop theorists such as utilitarians from concluding that they had thereby discovered by empirical means that pleasure, as such, is the universal human good. Therefore, the moral act or policy in every situation is that which will result “in the maximum amount of pleasure for the greatest number of people.”⁶ All such theories that see morality as based on the “good,” will then define the moral “right” in terms of the “good,” i.e., the morally “right” is always that which maximizes the “good,” so that in moral language, “good” is primary and “right” subsidiary.⁷

These theories are sometimes called teleological or consequentialist because they see the moral element as being not in the act itself, but in its consequences or “purpose” which is the supreme good.⁸

In contrast to the above approach, there are equally venerable theories which claim that morality is uniquely grounded in consciousness of a sense of duty. Actions are judged to be moral if they are in accordance with certain rules, so that unlike what is the case in utilitarianism, the primary moral predicate is the word “right” and the word “good” subsidiary. The sense of duty imparts a special “ought” to the rules and principles of morality that can set an individual against one’s other desires and can motivate one to overcome hardships in order to keep a

6. This thesis is known as utilitarianism and is associated most closely with the nineteenth century British thinkers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. A useful recent account of utilitarianism’s development is Julia Driver, “The History of Utilitarianism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online).

7. Jeremy Bentham held that the amount of pleasure (quantity) generated by each experience was to be measured by taking into consideration various dimensions, such as duration, intensity, purity, after-effects, and others. John Stuart Mill, however, claimed that quality of pleasure must also be considered, arguing that intellectual pleasures were in some sense “higher.” Therefore activities which generated intellectual pleasures were to be given preference over the lower pleasures. To ward off criticism that he has made an arbitrary value judgment, Mill argued that in any particular case, pleasure should be judged as higher only if so judged by individuals who had experience with both the higher and lower pleasures. See Mill, *Utilitarianism*, at the beginning of part II.

8. See Abraham Edel, *Science and the Structure of Ethics* (Chicago, 1967).

promise or to refrain from taking revenge. The moral “right” seems to come from some principle or standard which, in some sense, seems to be “outside” the orbit of self-interest and even the interests of a collective and seems to obligate me as a rational person. This is why the philosopher Immanuel Kant called the moral act a “categorical imperative,” meaning that the principle behind the act is accepted as binding for its own sake, “duty for duty’s sake,” rather than for the sake of attaining some end.⁹ Duties are usually formulated as rules, as laws or commands. Theories of this type are sometimes called deontological moralities because “deon” in Greek means obligation or duty.

It is precisely at this point that moral-language-analysis reaches an impasse. To understand this more clearly, we must compare morality to law in another respect. If we were to seek the source of the “ought” of conventional law and ask why we “ought” to obey the law in general, the answer cannot come from the law itself. One could not respond, “Because the law says so,” as this clearly begs the question. The answer can only come from some discipline that is broader than the law—such as morality. For example, according to one version of social contract theory, one is obliged to obey the law because as citizens of the state we have sworn to abide by its laws and as humans we are bound to keep our pledges. However, if one asks, “What is the source of the prescriptive element in morality?”, questioning what gives morality the authority to impose obligations, the answers would have to be sought in some philosophical theory of ethics. So, for example, a Kantian ethicist would reply that it is rationality itself that stands behind the moral “ought.” To disobey the categorical imperative, Kant argued, is to be guilty of self-contradiction, which compromises one’s rational nature. However, this has been seriously questioned, for while rationality as such is a guide for proper thinking, it does not obligate.

While certain approaches in modern philosophy have rejected the theories of particular philosophers that so clearly embodied the teleological (Aristotle) and the deontological (Kant) approaches, in terms of our quest, it is important to recognize that there is a kernel of truth in each broad approach that must be accounted for by any ethical theory that hopes to be taken seriously. First, the theory must be consistent with one’s concept of what it is to be human and provide for a sense of fulfillment of their nature (teleological). Second,

9. See Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*.

a credible theory must account for our sense of duty and for the prescriptive element in the moral experience in a way that does not see the fulfillment of duty as conceptually connected to promotion of the good (deontological, save for the duty to promote the good) that exists among other duties. Our conclusion is reflected in the analysis offered by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik who typically transposes what we have identified as components of the concept and *language* of morality into felt aspects of the moral *experience*. “An act is ethical when it is sponsored by two motives: the *imperativistic*, that is, under the pressure of normative feelings, and the *idealistic*, namely the fulfillment of the norm is experienced as redeeming, elevating and meaning-giving.”¹⁰

III

Let us now turn to the question we posed at the outset: Are there in biblical Hebrew equivalents to the terms “good” and “right” and do they convey the significant differences that we have assigned to them? For the word “good,” the obvious choice is the word *tov*, which is used as both an adjective and an abstract noun. As we have seen regarding the English word “good,” in general use as an adjective, *tov* can modify almost anything.¹¹ Its meaning is almost completely tied to the context, although it always retains its function as a term of approval. However, most of the time that it appears in the Bible (as well as in modern Hebrew), when *tov* is used to describe a person it is used in a moral sense. Thus, “Good (*tov*) is the man who deals graciously and lends and orders his affairs justly” (Ps. 112:5). It is also clear that the lifelong quest undertaken by Kohelet, “so that he might see which is the good for the sons of man (*tov li-benei ha-adam*) that they should do under the heavens the few days of their life” (Eccl. 2:3), was a search for the supreme good. Likewise, the prophet Mikhah states: “It has been told to you, O man, what is good (*tov*) and what the Lord requires of you—to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (Mikh. 6:2). Although acting justly and walking humbly often are required even if they do not promote pleasure and happiness, which are good even if not the only goods, those action patterns constitute the good life for human beings. Their supreme good (*tov*) is “that which the Lord requires of

10. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man* (Jersey City, 2005), 77.

11. For example, it is used to describe the Creation itself (Gen. 1:31), the gold in the land of Havalah (Gen. 2:11), and infant Moshe (Ex. 2:1).

you,” the laws and commandments revealed by God, chief of which are “to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” These values are also affirmed by our intuitive moral sense.

Similarly, *tov* is used in connection with God to highlight His moral qualities: “Praise the Lord, for He is good (*tov*), for His kindness endures forever” (Ps. 118:1). This is confirmed by the verse: “The Lord is good (*tov*) to all and His tender mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:9). Thus, to say that God is *good* means that God acts in ways that are beneficial to others. He brings into existence things that are of value to others, useful, and beautiful. He guides the history of humanity to an ultimate state of universal peace and justice, and He teaches people wisdom and reveals to them His statutes and judgments. Furthermore, to say that God is good also means, as it does in the case of human beings, that the moral qualities of justice, righteousness, mercy, and kindness are, in some sense, resident aspects of God’s personality. This is indicated by the verse, “You are good and You do good” (Ps. 119:68), suggesting that to *be* good in the moral sense is also to *do* good to others. Since performing good acts is explicitly mentioned in the latter part of the verse, the first statement, “You are good”—seems to be saying that God *Himself* is good. Similarly, in Moshe’s epiphany on Mount Sinai, God declares Himself *to be* “. . . the Lord, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth” (Ex. 34:6). The subject of these adjectives is God Himself. This implies that there is a sense in which to say that “God is moral” is to assert more than “God performs moral actions.” That is, moral value is a resident aspect of God’s personality. Of course it is impossible to say anything beyond this.

For the Hebrew equivalent of the English term “right” when used as an adjective in a general context, one might suggest the words *nakhon* or *tzodek*. These, however, are closer to the English “correct,” “appropriate,” or “justified.” The equivalent of the term “right” in a moral context would more precisely be *yashar*, which is variously translated as “straightforward,” “righteous,” “just,” or “honest.” In modern Hebrew (as in the case of “right” in English) the word *yashar* can often appear in non-moral contexts, simply meaning “straight,” as in a “straight line” (*kav yashar*) or “straight ahead” (*yashar, yashar*) or with the implication of “direct.” In the Bible, however, the term is usually related to morality. For example, we find references to a group of people termed *yesharim*, often translated as “the upright,” about whom it is said: “The way of the

upright (*yesharim*) shall save them” (Prov. 11:6). The phoneme *yashar* may sometimes take the form *yosher*, used as an abstract noun, meaning “righteousness,” “equity,” “fairness,” or “decency.” As an adjective, the word *yashar* may be used to describe one’s “way” (Jer. 3:9), one’s “heart” (Ps. 32:11), God’s “work” (Prov. 20:11), God’s “word” (Ps. 33:4), or the human being himself, as we are told of Job: “and he was wholehearted (*tam*) and upright (*yashar*) and feared God” (Job 1:1). In all of these verses, the word *yashar* has clear moral significance, as it does in Moshe’s description of God: “just and right (*yashar*) is He” (Deut. 32:4).

Is there any indication that *yashar* when used as an adjective in a moral context implies, like the word “right” in English, a judgment according to some objective standard? Perhaps there is a hint of this in the non-moral use of *yashar*, as in the statement “that line is straight (*yashar*).” If challenged, the issue can be resolved by producing a ruler, an objective standard. There is an indication from the word’s use in the Bible that *yashar* is an objective judgment. In one of the first appeals to the Israelites to obey God and to do what is right, the text reads: “And you will do that which is right (*yashar*) in His eyes. . . .” (Ex. 15:26).¹² Evidently, to perceive what is morally right in any particular situation is not a matter given immediately to subjective experience, but rather requires a judgment based upon some general rule or principle, in this case the rule or principle “Do what is right *in God’s eyes*.” A situation in which “every man did that which was right (*yashar*) in *his own eyes*” (Jud. 21:24) was tantamount to moral anarchy. Therefore, before the basic principles of Torah-morality had been internalized, reference to the morally right (*ha-yashar*) had to be qualified by adding the words “in the eyes of the Lord your God,” who would soon reveal His rules and principles of morality. Also, when the term *yashar* is used to describe God Himself, it is usually accompanied by some additional moral attribute of God that is more specific and well known. Thus, “A God of faithfulness and without iniquity; just and right (*yashar*) is He” (Deut. 32:4). “The Lord is upright (*yashar*), my Rock in whom there is no injustice” (Ps. 92:16).¹³

12. This is the most important consequence of man being “created in the image of God”—he is able to recognize and appreciate moral values through his moral sense. This is the basis for the concept of “*imitatio dei*”—the ability of the human being to become like God.

13. See also Ps. 25:8.

IV

Having shown that the terms *tov* and *yashar* correspond to the English words “good” and “right” when used in moral discourse, let us proceed to apply this insight in the interpretation of two well-known texts, one biblical and one rabbinic. Consider the following verses from Deuteronomy and the puzzling dispute that they engendered between R. Yishmael and R. Akiva:

“When you do the good (*tov*) and the right (*yashar*) in the eyes of the Lord your God” (Deut. 12:28). “The good” in the eyes of heaven, “the right” in the eyes of man; these are the words of R. Akiva. R. Yishmael says, “the right” in the eyes of heaven, “the good” in the eyes of man, as it is said: “So shall you find grace and good favor (*tov*) in the eyes of God and man” (Prov. 3:4).¹⁴ . . . “To do that which is right (*yashar*) in the eyes of the Lord your God” (Deut. 13:19). This is what was said by R. Yishmael: “The right” in the eyes of God.”¹⁵

What was the point of disagreement between R. Yishmael and R. Akiva? What considerations led them to adopt opposing interpretations of the same verse? More basically, why do both reject the possibility that this qualification “in the eyes of the Lord” applies to both the good and the right, as a superficial reading of the text suggests?¹⁶ This would have given them a very “safe” view of morality, namely that in all aspects of morality one must rely only on what is right and good in the eyes of God. Evidently, both rabbis brought to the discussion the presupposition that there are wide areas of moral experience in which what is morally proper in the “eyes of man” reflects the will of God. Hence, once the text evokes the issue through a seemingly selective use of “in the eyes of the Lord your God,” the door is opened to the question of “what aspects of morality can be properly judged by our human moral faculty (“in the eyes of man”). But what brought the two rabbis to their different viewpoints?

R. Yishmael is well-known for his close attachment to the literal meaning of the text. Thus, once he finds an independent passage in which “the right” appears alone with the phrase “in the eyes of God” (Deut. 13:19) and another passage in which “the good” appears to parallel “the eyes of man” (Prov. 3:41), R. Yishmael feels confident in his interpretation.

14. *Sifrei* 52.

15. *Ibid.* 86.

16. This reading is further supported by the wording in Deut. 6:18.

Understanding the view of R. Akiva is much more difficult. Interestingly, R. Akiva offers no proof-texts in support of his interpretation, implying that his view is not based on any particular text, but upon his own understanding of moral experience. Indeed, throughout his teachings, R. Akiva demonstrates a remarkable interest in and insight into the subject of morality and its role in the Torah. For example, it is precisely R. Akiva who declares that “love your fellow man as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) is *the* great principle of the Torah (Gen. Rabbah 24:7). It is he who teaches us in *Avot* (3:18) that the greatest sign of God’s love for man is that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God through the verse, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God did He make man” (Gen. 9:6).¹⁷

R. Akiva’s point is not that an individual knows that he or she was created *be-zelem Elokim* because it is so written in the Torah; were that his intent, he would have cited the earlier, more obvious verse recounting man’s original creation (Gen. 1:27). Rather, his point is that, in recognizing a congruity between God’s being inherently “merciful and full of kindness” (Ex. 34:6) and his own moral intuitions, the human being hears an echo of his having been created in God’s “likeness” (Gen. 1:26). This is uniquely confirmed by the passage in Gen. 9:6, which links the concept of *zelem Elokim* with the moral principle of retributive justice: “Whosoever sheds the blood of man . . . his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God did He make man.” This verse appears following or perhaps as part of the blessing for fruitfulness that God bestows on the new humanity (Gen. 9:1). Like the earlier such blessings given during Creation (Gen. 1:22, 28), these post-deluvian blessings are not meant as heteronomous commands, but as referring to built-in faculties. R. Akiva maintains that, just as the human being has an innate potential to “be fertile, increase, and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1), the human being has an innate potential to recognize and appreciate, both in theory and in real life, moral principles such as justice (*mishpat*), righteousness (*yosher*), mercy (*rahamim*), and kindness (*hesed*). Thus, when R. Akiva is confronted by the choice of deciding which of the two components of the moral experience, the good (*tov*) or the right (*yashar*), is naturally recognized by human beings and which must await the judgment of God, it is understandable that he will associate the “right” (*yashar*) with

17. See also n. 12 above.

“the eyes of man,” because people’s sense is most effective in recognizing the “ought” component. In contrast, deciding what the moral “good” is in any given situation cannot be discerned by human beings. It is ultimately a value judgment and therefore must be checked against the teachings of the Torah.

With this distinction between the “good” and the “right” in hand, we may also better understand a pair of familiar rabbinic texts. Both appear as individual *mishnayot* in the second chapter of *Avot* and take the form of a general question followed by answers. Let us start with the questions:

I. He [R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai] said to them [his five disciples]: “Go forth and see what is the *good way (derekh tovah)* to which a person should cleave?” (*Avot* 2:13).

II. Rabbi [Yehudah Ha-Nasi] said: “Which is the *right way (derekh yesharah)* that a person should choose for himself?” (*Avot* 2:1).

For anyone familiar with the Written and Oral Torah and the 613 commandments, the prospect that any rabbi would find it necessary or even intelligible to pose such a question is astonishing! Closer attention to the question of R. Yohanan ben Zakkai may mitigate this difficulty. His instruction to his disciples was: “*Go forth and see.*” That is to say, he wanted them to go out into the practical world and test the theoretical teachings that they had received against the harsh reality of real life, and therefrom draw the master moral trait that a person should cultivate. But what was the intention of R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi in asking his question, whose answer he himself immediately supplies? Let us examine the responses each of the rabbis received:

I. R. Eliezer says: A *good eye*; R. Yehoshua says: A *good friend*; R. Yosi says: A *good neighbor*; R. Shimon says: One who foresees the fruit of an action; R. Elazar says: A *good heart* (*Avot* 2:13).

II. That which is an honor (*tif’eret*) to he who does it and which brings him honor (*tif’eret*) from man (*Avot* 2:1).¹⁸

What was it about the respective questions that elicited such different answers? While at first glance the “good way” and the “right way” in Judaism would seem to ultimately reflect the same kind of

18. The Hebrew word *tif’eret*, translated here as “honor,” can also mean “beauty” or “glory,” as in “crowning glory” (see Prov. 20:29). Thus, to act morally is man’s “crowning glory” in that it is a concrete expression of his unique capacity as a responsible being.

values and behavior, a significant difference in the questions becomes apparent upon comparing the phrase “to which a person should *cleave*” to that of “that a person should *choose* for himself.” Of course, in any event, the individual is being asked to choose. However, the language “to which a person should cleave” suggests that the subject is “value” or, more precisely, some personal character trait. This is supported by the nature of the answers:

- A *good eye* = sees the good in others, be free from envy
- A *good friend* = be a considerate, helpful companion
- A *good neighbor* = be generous, helpful, concerned
- One who foresees the fruit of one’s action = be responsible, do not act impulsively
- A *good heart* = have unselfish love for others in thought and deed

All of these require personal character traits which, to be effective, a person must make a permanent part of his personality. Hence, the expression “. . . to which a person should cleave.” Note that these answers were not accompanied by proof-texts; they are not derived from Scripture. This is in line with R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s directive to base the answers on personal experience and judgment.

Similarly, R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi, in his clearly rhetorical question, is not simply requesting a reaffirmation of Torah values; he is asking for a theoretical formulation of the *right* way that a man should choose for himself. As we stated earlier, to judge an action or omission, i.e. failure to act as morally *right*, implies the making of a rational judgment based upon some general principle. And this is precisely what R. Yehudah gives us, a general rule to be used as a criterion by which any particular act or judgment can be tested as to its “rightness.”

- That which is an honor (*tif’eret*) to he who does it and brings him honor (*ti’feret*) from man.

R. Yehudah’s two-part statement addresses the gap that sometimes opens between the particular act of the agent, based upon his personal judgment, and the corresponding abstract principle stemming from the concept of a human being that is part of public discourse. It stipulates two criteria by which to judge whether an act is morally right.

1) It is a positive experience (*tif'eret*) for one who does it. The individual will feel a sense of personal fulfillment, having discharged a felt duty.

2) The person will find that the way he has chosen also seems “right” to the community—“honor from man.”¹⁹

Thus we have demonstrated that the use of the terms “good” and “right” in a moral context, in both English and Hebrew, reflect the subtle differences that these terms have acquired from the different aspects of the moral experience to which they refer.

V

Earlier in discussing the type of ethical theory that emphasizes the centrality of the “right,” we pointed out that in seeking the source of moral duty, asking by what authority moral principles are said to obligate the human being, we find ourselves knocking at the gates of philosophy. Unfortunately, however, in the field of ethical theory, philosophy has not been able to arrive at any agreed-upon solution. As we noted earlier, all factual statements about the world are cast as “is” statements, whereas the normative aspects of morality take the form of “ought” statements. And it would appear that David Hume’s argument that logic does not permit the drawing of “ought” conclusions from purely “is” statements is sound.²⁰ This means that nothing we know or might ever learn about human beings or nature can by itself yield any prescriptive statements.

Of course, attempts continue to be made to “explain away” the feeling of a “moral sense” as a mere psychological vestige of an earlier period in human history, when the survival of the social unit depended upon the cultivation of certain behavior and which was internalized as a kind of conscience or special sense. If we accept this view, then the continued use of “the moral right” in modern languages would have to be viewed as an instance of what has been called a “cut-flower” culture. Just as flowers, although cut off from their life-giving roots, retain their beauty and fragrance for a while and are therefore found to be useful,

19. Compare this analysis to that of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik at the end of section I. This unusual teaching, which is nothing less than a philosophic analysis of the moral act, is quite befitting for R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi, who was a descendant of Hillel the Elder, who taught that “that which is hateful to you do not do to others,” and who was on friendly terms with the intellectually inclined Roman rulers of the time.

20. See Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, III:1:1.

so too the language of morality. It came into existence as a reflection of some deeply-seated metaphysical beliefs regarding God and a moral order, but today, society no longer maintains these beliefs. This moral language, with all its implications, continues to be employed for the simple reason that it is found useful.²¹

However, the unresolved problems in ethical theory that we have indicated pose more than just a philosophical difficulty. I believe that they can have unfortunate practical consequences. Very often, principles such as kindness and loyalty call for choices that are opposed by strong instinctual sentiments, such as self-interest. In such situations, which call for a measure of self-sacrifice, individuals who feel tempted tend to question the source and authority of morality. In the past, it was perhaps the moral passion of the prophet speaking in the name of God who is “merciful and gracious . . . abundant in kindness and truth” that gave real substance to moral values, thus strengthening the motivation of the individual. Bereft of the Divine source, the language of morality becomes something of an empty shell, like bank-notes being used for currency for which there are no gold reserves.²²

The moral theory of Judaism escapes being classified as either “teleological” (consequentialist) or “deontological,” each to the exclusion of the other, as it considers both the “good” and the “right” to be essential components of the moral experience. Morality was never treated as an item, of and by itself, but rather was understood as an integral part of the entire system of Halakhah and belief. In the Pentateuch, moral rules are hardly distinguishable from the other commandments. It remained for the prophets and the rabbis to point to the centrality and intrinsic nature of moral values. Ultimately it is precisely the moral values of justice, righteousness, mercy, and kindness “that the Lord requires of us,” and those alone can positively be attributed to God, Who *is* righteous, merciful and kind. Moral values are *from* God, *of* God, and the way *to* God. Indeed, it is precisely the near identity of God and moral values that gives the morality of Judaism its distinctive qualities, an “urgency” towards implementation and the note of “hysteria among the prophets” when the innocent suffer.²³

21. See Elizabeth Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33 (Jan. 1958): 1-19; and the famous book by Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN, 3rd ed., 1987).

22. Cf., however, Yitzchak Blau, “Ivan Karamazov Revisited: The Moral Argument for Religious Belief,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 11 (2002-03): 50-60.

23. In the ancient world, wisdom was considered the source of morality, so that the highest form of moral expression consisted of abstract concepts such as “Justice” and

Clearly, in Judaism, the source of the moral “ought,” the authority behind the prescriptive element, is God. However, He is not simply some “item” inserted as a sort of *deus ex machina* to fill an empty spot in some theory. A careful reconstruction of the biblical narrative provides a clearer picture. Since the values of justice, righteousness, mercy, and kindness are, in some sense, aspects of God Himself, and since human beings are free agents, created in “the image and likeness of God,” they are able under proper stimuli to develop a sensitivity to these moral values, recognize them, and be attracted to them. At some point the human being hears a command from God (Gen. 2:16,17), which his incipient moral sense tells him he ought to obey. God is the source of morality in Judaism not only in the sense of being the author of the moral commandments, but in that in creating man in His image He endowed him with an intuitive moral sense which recognizes the obligation to express gratitude to benefactors. Without God, we would not know whom to thank or whether to take one’s moral intuitions seriously. The temptations to disobey are strong and human beings often succumb. However, as a result of that struggle and the many others that follow, a person begins to recognize among the many voices within himself one that he can identify with and call “I.” This is the crucial step in the development of a sense of “self” and the formation of personality.²⁴

Accordingly, the authority behind the “ought” of morality as a whole is indeed God. Subjectively, this translates into a human being’s sense of obligation owed to the Creator out of gratitude. This is experienced as compelling because the values we call moral are aspects of God Himself; when experienced by human beings, they become impregnated with a unique religious quality of holiness (*kedushah*), thus integrating the ethical and the religious. The prophet already hinted at this when he explained: “The Lord of Hosts is *exalted* through *justice*; the Holy God is *sanctified* through *righteousness*” (Isaiah 5:16).

“Good.” In Judaism, however, it was the prophets, the spokesmen of the moral God, who were the source of morality. This God had created the cosmos so that the abstract concepts of morality could be implemented in the concrete reality of human life. See Shubert Spero, *Morality, Halakha and the Jewish Tradition* (New York, 1983), 119-65. Hebrew prophetic literature is characterized by an intensity, passion, and almost “hysterical tone” with which the prophets denounced the immorality of their times. This is because they believed that every act of injustice, in some sense, “affects” God. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 1955), 9.
24. *Ibid.*, chapter 5. See also Israel I. Efros, *Ancient Jewish Philosophy* (Detroit, 1964), 119.

Conclusion

We have shown that in terms of the language used in biblical and rabbinic Hebrew in dealing with moral experience, there seems to be a clear awareness of the differences between the “good” and the “right.” However, on the philosophical level when confronted with the problem of the ultimate source of the moral “ought,” Jewish theology, by so closely identifying the Goodness of God with moral values, does not confront the Humean gap between the “is” and the “ought.” That is, from the very beginning, God is *experienced* not simply as an “is,” but in some sense as saturated with what we experience as moral values and provides the ultimate “ought.” The Good God is experienced as a Commanding God. Those who stood at Sinai not only *heard* the words “thou shalt not,” but felt its *imperative* voice to become part of their very being.

Thus, R. Soloveitchik writes about Abraham:

The moral law was revealed to him by his God . . . who speaks from beyond and within his own personality. . . . He chances to find it [the moral law] within himself and to consciously adopt it. . . . Only later does he find out, to his surprise, that with the moral law in himself he has discovered the God of morality beyond himself.²⁵

25. R. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, 154.