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The Philosophical Foundations of Soloveitchik's Critique of Interfaith Dialogue

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Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993) is often cited as the outstanding figure of modern Orthodox Judaism in the twentieth century.¹ Born into one of the most famous rabbinic families of nineteenth-century Lithuanian Jewry, Soloveitchik held unimpeachable “Orthodox” credentials, and as head of the Talmud faculty at New York’s Yeshiva University, he spent his active working life as a teacher of Talmud. With his deep roots in the world of the Lithuanian yeshivah (Talmudic academy), Soloveitchik was an exemplar of the sophisticated “Brisker” method of Talmudic study that had reached its apotheosis in the hands of his grandfather, the great R. Chaim Brisker (1853–1918). This “Brisker” method,² with its emphasis on conceptual precision and abstract analysis, was characterized by the value it placed on the intellectual pursuit of Talmud study “for its own sake.”³ Significantly, though, the intellectual pursuits that Soloveitchik valued expanded his intellectual horizons far beyond traditional Talmudic fare. Thus, in a famously pioneering break with family tradition, at the age of twenty-two he went to study at the University of Berlin where

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the British Association of Jewish Studies Conference, University of Southampton, England, in July 2002.

²So called after the town of Brest-Litovsk (Brisk), where R. Chaim settled after his time as the *rosh* (head) of the Volozhin Yeshivah.

³For further discussion of the Brisker method, see Norman Solomon, *The Analytic Movement: Hayyim Soloveitchik and his Circle* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1993); Marc B. Shapiro, “The Brisker Method Reconsidered,” *Tradition* 31, no. 3 (1997), 78–102; and Moshe Soloveitchik, “‘What’ Hath Brisk Wrought: The *Brisker Derekh* Revisited,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 9 (2000) 1–18.

he would receive a doctorate in philosophy, concentrating on the epistemology and ontology of the Neo-Kantian Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen.

At home, therefore, in the languages of both contemporary philosophy and Orthodox Judaism, Soloveitchik was perfectly placed to articulate the philosophical and theological foundations of an intellectually sophisticated Orthodoxy for modern Jews. The perception of Soloveitchik as the foremost theoretician of modern Orthodoxy, however, has since led both the more traditionalist and more modernist wings of that community to claim him as the embodiment of their own understandings of what it represents. This paper focuses on one locus of this battle over Soloveitchik's legacy: his 1964 article on interfaith dialogue, "Confrontation."⁴

In a recent article, Lawrence Kaplan has criticized the culture of revisionism that infects the posthumous treatment of Soloveitchik's work and personality.⁵ Kaplan is equally wary of attempts to paint Soloveitchik as an unreconstructed traditionalist who dabbled in philosophy out of strategic necessity as he is of attempts to portray him as a trailblazing thinker willing to compromise his traditionalism in the name of secular philosophy. "Confrontation," however, is widely seen as a perfect example of how the traditional Lithuanian *rosh yeshivah* got the better of the philosopher in its apparent forbidding of Jewish-Christian discussion on theological matters. Even David Singer and Moshe Sokol, while certainly not guilty of the simplifications that Kaplan criticizes, traced his "strangely negative attitude towards inter-religious dialogue [to] a lingering concern over what they would say in 'Brisk.'"⁶ Singer and Sokol can only see "Confrontation" as "a conservative break on his outreach to modernity."⁷

The central argument of this paper is that Soloveitchik's entire approach to interfaith dialogue can in fact be based on firm philosophical foundations that he first laid out as early as 1944. Thus, far from being a conservative break on his outreach to modernity, it reflects a deep-seated philosophical methodology that one might even identify as part of that "modernity." I do not, however, intend to repeat the mistake of modernist revisionism, for I believe that we ought not to dilute either pole of Soloveitchik's thought. A subsidiary aim of this paper, therefore, will be to show that facile one-dimensional analyses of his thought fail to do justice to its complexity.

We will approach these aims by summarizing the argument of "Confrontation" in the first section of this paper and then, as a point of contrast with our own approach, briefly addressing David Hartman's recent political interpretation of that

⁴Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition* 6, no. 2 (1964) 5–29.

⁵Lawrence Kaplan, "Revisionism and the Rav: The Struggle for the Soul of Modern Orthodoxy," *Judaism* 48 (1999) 290–311.

⁶David Singer and Moshe Sokol, "Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith," *Modern Judaism* 2 (1982) 227–72, at 255.

⁷*Ibid.*

article in the second section. The central argument is found in the third section, where we present Soloveitchik's philosophical methodology as described in *The Halakhic Mind*⁸ in order to show how it provides a philosophical route to the conclusions of "Confrontation." Finally, in the concluding section we will look at the bearing of our argument on the debate concerning Soloveitchik's relative traditionalism or modernism.

■ The Argument of "Confrontation"

"Confrontation" begins with an analysis of the biblical accounts of the creation of man, from which Soloveitchik extracts a philosophical anthropology based on three progressive levels of human being. At the first level, human beings are described as natural nonconfronted beings whose existence is seen as "merging harmoniously with the general order of things and events."⁹ Persons at this level are identified by Soloveitchik as entirely "hedonically-minded and pleasure-seeking,"¹⁰ with no awareness of their unique status within the hierarchy of being.

At the second level, though, human beings become confronted beings, conscious of their separation from nature, in which the first level of person is absorbed. These beings confront their environment as a subject does an object, discovering their independence from nature and at that point receiving a divine imperative. Thus, at the same time that human beings are able to subject the natural order to their rule and dominion through their intellect and creativity, the divine imperative has them nonetheless surrendering to God, responding to a normative call that will not allow their dominance of nature to descend into a "demonic urge for power."¹¹

The third level that Soloveitchik describes is that of a further confrontation between subject and subject rather than subject and object. Here, there is a reciprocal confrontation between two beings, both aware of their existential uniqueness and both craving redemption from the loneliness this entails. At this level of confrontation, communication is necessary for companionship, but Soloveitchik's fundamental contention is that such communication is always limited in its efficacy. Soloveitchik writes that "in all personal unions such as marriage, friendship, or comradeship, however strong the bonds uniting two individuals, the *modi existantiae* remain totally unique and hence, incongruous, at both levels, the ontological and the experiential."¹² Whatever interests and common goals people may share, the ultimate existential union is unachievable and thus, reflecting the dialectical

⁸Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind* (New York: Free Press, 1986). Hereafter, references to this work will be in the main text in the form *HM*, followed by page number.

⁹Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," 6.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 13.

¹²*Ibid.*, 15.

theme that constantly rises to the surface of his work in this period, Soloveitchik writes that one is condemned to practicing “the difficult dialectical art of . . . being one with and at the same time, different from, his human confronter, of living in community and simultaneously in solitude.”¹³

It is on the basis of these anthropological models that Soloveitchik reaches his conclusions regarding Jewish-Christian dialogue. The implication that he draws from his account is that Jews have been called to engage in a double confrontation in which people are both human beings “sharing the destiny of Adam in his general encounter with nature, and . . . members of a covenantal community which has preserved its identity under most unfavourable conditions, confronted by another faith community.”¹⁴ The Jew has therefore been burdened with the double responsibility of heeding the call to engage, as a human being, the universal aspects of his personality and mission, while at the same time not sacrificing the particularistic aspects of the covenant that God has made with the Jews.¹⁵

In Soloveitchik’s eyes, the westernized Jew has found it difficult to adjust to this double confrontation. Having engaged in the universal cognitive quest described at the second level of his anthropology, the modern Jew is often unable simultaneously to withhold from this and stake out the area of irredeemable particularity described at the third level. Thus, he does not understand the true conflicted nature of Jewish identity. And it is this that appears to underlie Soloveitchik’s concerns about Jewish-Christian dialogue. The failure of modern Jews to appreciate the unique aspect of Jewish identity means that they cannot understand that “each faith community is engaged in a singular normative gesture reflecting the numinous nature of the act of faith itself, and it is futile to try to find common denominators.”¹⁶

Moreover, those who understand only a single-confrontation philosophy are unable to see the possibility for genuine dialogue despite difference. This, according to Soloveitchik, has been the problem with previous interfaith confrontations in that they have been modeled solely on the single confrontation between subject and object, in which the latter is seen as a commodity for domination by the former. Thus “non-Jewish society has confronted us throughout the ages in a mood of defiance, as if we were part of the subhuman objective order separated by an abyss from the human.”¹⁷ However, this does not rule out the possibility of interfaith dialogue for Soloveitchik. Rather it gives us the model of how that dialogue must be conducted, a model based on the double confrontation that faced Adam and Eve:

¹³Ibid., 16.

¹⁴Ibid., 17.

¹⁵This particularism is reflected at three levels of the faith experience for Soloveitchik, though made particularly clear in the halakic system’s resistance to any attempts at universal rationalization. See *ibid.*, 18–19.

¹⁶Ibid., 19.

¹⁷Ibid., 19–20.

In the same manner as Adam and Eve confronted and attempted to subdue a malicious scoffing nature and yet nevertheless encountered each other as two separate individuals cognizant of their incommensurability and uniqueness, so also two faith communities which coordinate their efforts when confronted by the cosmic order may face each other in the full knowledge of their distinctness and individuality.¹⁸

The most important implication of this is that dialogue can only take place at a level where we share common ethical or social concerns, i.e., where we can find common denominators. But, given the incommunicable nature of the faith experiences particular to each community, dialogue at the deepest theological level is ruled out *ab initio* in any respectful interfaith dialogue. It is here that the aforementioned futility of looking for common denominators is encountered, for there are none to be found: the faith experience cannot be universalized.¹⁹ Each community must always be viewed from the perspective of its own conceptual framework and not subjected to alien categories of thought, meaning that Judaism cannot therefore be understood through Christian categories of reference (nor *vice versa*). Thus the position that Soloveitchik advocates is summed up as follows:

We cooperate with the members of other faith communities in all fields of constructive human endeavour, but, simultaneously with our integration into the general social framework, we engage in a movement of recoil and retrace our steps. In a word, we belong to the human society and, at the same time, we feel as strangers and outsiders. . . . We are indeed involved in the cultural endeavour and yet we are committed to another dimension of experience.²⁰

■ David Hartman's Political Interpretation

"Confrontation" has often been interpreted in a manner that reflects negatively on interfaith dialogue. Moshe Meiselman, for example, writes that "When Pope John XXIII opened dialogue with the Jews, the Rav viewed this as a serious danger to Judaism, and declared that no such dialogue be pursued."²¹

It should be obvious from our brief outline of the paper that "Confrontation" itself does not present such a view. While it does set limits to the dialogue, most notably to the inclusion of theological elements, that is far from forbidding engagement in such dialogue at all, which indeed is seen as a vital expression of the prescribed double confrontation. Nonetheless, Soloveitchik's position is certainly

¹⁸Ibid., 20

¹⁹Whether or not we need to find such common denominators in order to engage in interfaith dialogue, as Soloveitchik appears to believe, is a question to which we will return in the conclusion.

²⁰Ibid., 26.

²¹Moshe Meiselman, "The Rav, Feminism and Public Policy: An Insider's Overview," *Tradition* 33, no. 1 (1998) 5–30, at 22.

a conservative one. The question is whether, as Singer and Sokol state, it is only Soloveitchik's psychological struggles with his Lithuanian heritage that prevent fuller engagement. Recently, David Hartman has dismissed this psychological approach, substituting a political interpretation of "Confrontation" that shows it to be consistent with Soloveitchik's general theological presuppositions, and it will be instructive to focus briefly on his argument, since our approaches share certain formal features.²²

According to Hartman, the standard approach that sees "Confrontation" as forbidding theological dialogue is mistaken. The fear is not interfaith dialogue per se, but who might undertake it. According to Hartman, Soloveitchik is concerned that the wrong type of Jew will engage in this dialogue. It is only the few, such as Soloveitchik himself, who can utilize the thought of an Otto or a Kierkegaard without sacrificing the singularity of the Jewish faith experience.²³ But the westernized Jew who misrepresents and misunderstands Judaism as a religion requiring only the single universal confrontation may well acquiesce in the subjugation of Judaism to universal categories that will eliminate its numinous faith element.

From the Christian side, moreover, dialogue has not historically been carried out in an atmosphere of mutual respect. The Christian, engaged in a single confrontation, has often sought to instrumentalize Judaism, an approach that Soloveitchik fears would be accepted by the singly confronted modern Jew. According to Hartman, therefore, "Confrontation" is a political responsum. Its form is dictated by the nature of public disputation, a forum that often aims at accommodation and compromise. But Soloveitchik does not thereby rule out "mutual exchange of ideas, and the importance of making sense of Judaism within a larger intellectual frame of reference."²⁴

While it is clear that Soloveitchik does not rule out interfaith dialogue according to Hartman, it is not entirely clear to me whether Hartman sees him as ruling out *theological* dialogue. On the one hand, he writes:

Soloveitchik does not close the door to Jewish-Christian discussions, but places very careful barriers, . . . reminding Jews that there is a dimension to their faith that permanently condemns them to separation and isolation. R. Soloveitchik seems to be saying that, on the one hand, he would allow certain individuals to participate in this discussion so long as they are aware that full

²²See David Hartman, *Love and Terror in the God Encounter: The Theological Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, vol. 1 (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001) ch. 5.

²³A point reaffirmed by Walter Wurzburger in his "Justification and Limitations of Interfaith Dialogue," in *Judaism and The Interfaith Movement* (ed. Walter S. Wurzburger and Eugene B. Borowitz; New York: Synagogue Council of America, 1967) 7–16.

²⁴Hartmann, *Love and Terror*, 156. Hartman believes that Soloveitchik therefore distinguishes between the private use by an individual of Christian theologians in order to make sense of one's own faith experience and the public nature of interfaith dialogue, where such cross-fertilization seems to have been severely circumscribed.

communication is not possible. For R. Soloveitchik, they cannot share all things together, because there is no identity without uniqueness, singularity and separateness. Therefore, in the dialogue with Christianity, he could trust only those Jews who could bear the burden of solitude. . . . Only those who can live with what R. Soloveitchik calls double-confrontation can enter into Jewish-Christian dialogue.²⁵

While this might appear to uphold the barriers against theological dialogue, more generally Hartman notes that “the incommunicable nature of the faith experience cannot be his final word on Jewish Christian dialogue.”²⁶ Thus he sketches, albeit very briefly, a place for such dialogue in what he terms “the experiential dimension of faith.” “How religious values are internalized and how they shape human character”²⁷ can provide a forum for dialogue, and he gives as an example Soloveitchik’s reinterpretation of the concept of providence in terms of a demand to become a self-creating person. This means that “Jews and Christians can engage in a common *theological* discussion on how their respective traditions can develop self-creative personalities” (emphasis added).²⁸

The space that this creates for genuine theological dialogue would, it seems to me, remain at best very limited. As Hartman himself admits, the faith experience “is often interpreted in exclusivist language,”²⁹ and while a common understanding of providence might provide a basis for dialogue, in many theological areas the categories of thought of each faith tradition would preclude it. Having said that, it is worth noting that the universal “secular” level at which Soloveitchik does allow for dialogue might itself be seen as theological rather than “secular” when grounded in the shared religious context of an *interfaith* dialogue.³⁰

Whatever the precise nuances of his position, what Hartman has shown is that Soloveitchik’s stance need not be seen as anomalous, but as dictated by his understanding of the faith experience and the sociopolitical reality then confronting Judaism. While I would agree with Hartman in his contention that “Confrontation” need not be seen as a problematic anomaly in Soloveitchik’s thought, I believe that this conclusion need not be reached by applying an exclusively pragmatic analysis. Indeed, the point that one must not interpret Judaism in terms of Christian categories, which Hartman depicts merely as a piece of practical advice for Christians, in

²⁵Ibid., 150.

²⁶Ibid., 138.

²⁷Ibid., 155.

²⁸Ibid., 156.

²⁹Ibid., 163.

³⁰Indeed, this is something that Soloveitchik himself notes in “Confrontation,” 24 n. 8, and that is particularly emphasized by Walter Wurzburger in his “Justification and Limitations of Interfaith Dialogue.” Kaplan also believes that this is central to Soloveitchik’s position, as made manifest in his avoidance of the term “secular” in a later piece, “On Interfaith Relationships,” repr. in *A Treasury of Tradition* (ed. N. Lamm and W. Wurzburger; New York: Ktav, 1967) 78–80.

fact reflects a far more fundamental philosophical foundation for the conclusions of “Confrontation.”

■ “Confrontation” and Soloveitchik’s Philosophical Methodology

In the final section of his 1944 work *The Halakhic Mind*,³¹ Soloveitchik notes that the medieval Jewish philosophers had mistakenly attempted to form a Jewish worldview out of foreign philosophical material when in truth “there is only a single source from which a Jewish philosophical *Weltanschauung* could emerge; . . . the *Halakhah*” (*HM*, 101). Now this might be taken again to be a reflection of an inherent religious conservatism. Indeed, I would not deny that such considerations might have a part to play in explaining Soloveitchik’s choice of philosophical methodology. In *The Halakhic Mind*, however, the argument for this proposition is drawn entirely from philosophy, most particularly from the philosophy of science, though at the same time the scientific theme of the enterprise is tempered by a second antinaturalist strand that in many ways anticipates his later existentialism.³²

How exactly does he arrive at this conclusion? Soloveitchik’s debt to the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism for whom the physical sciences and mathematics represented the highest form of objective knowledge led him in his early works to emphasize the importance of establishing a religious philosophy on a sound scientific or empirical basis. Thus:

religion should ally itself with the forces of clear, logical cognition, as uniquely exemplified in the scientific method, even though at times the two might clash with one another.³³

³¹For an excellent summary of this work, see William Kolbrener, “Towards a Genuine Jewish Philosophy: *Halakhic Mind*’s New Philosophy of Religion,” repr. in *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (ed. Marc D. Angel; Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1997) 179–206.

³²While existentialism is at the forefront of the argument in “Confrontation,” we will be tracing a more “rationalistic” route to our conclusions, thus reflecting a methodological approach that Soloveitchik continued to affirm throughout his writings. As Kolbrener (“Towards a Genuine Jewish Philosophy,” 198) correctly notes, “The Rav’s later works are steeped in the religious philosophy articulated in *The Halakhic Mind*.” Moreover, though the argument in this paper has not to my knowledge been articulated in any detail before, Jonathan Sacks does note in his perceptive review of *The Halakhic Mind*: “There is a straight road from *The Halakhic Mind* to the argument in “Confrontation” (“Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Early Epistemology,” repr. in *Tradition in an Untraditional Age* [London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1990] 287–301, esp. 297. The reason that the philosophical route we will be tracing is not explicit in “Confrontation” might be connected with the forum in which the paper was presented, where the highly technical arguments of *The Halakhic Mind* would not have been appropriate.

³³Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (trans. Lawrence Kaplan; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983) 141 n. 4. Note that the term “science” when unqualified is used in what follows to signify natural science. It is worth noting that in *The Halakhic Mind*, Soloveitchik notes both pragmatic and theoretical reasons for preferring the scientific method. See *HM*, 52–56.

The religious philosopher could not, however, be expected to deal exclusively with the quantitative universe and methods of Newtonian science, and Soloveitchik argues that the scientific community itself opened up new vistas of opportunity for the religious philosopher by questioning the classical Newtonian picture. Most decisively, according to Soloveitchik, Newtonians stood accused of making a methodological error—that of using an exclusively atomistic or piecemeal method in order to form their quantitative picture of nature. The discovery by quantum physicists of data that vitiated accepted Newtonian principles led to the realization that they must provide a new philosophical framework to explain the “enigmatic behaviour of certain ‘strings of events’” (*HM*, 60). What the quantum physicists understood, therefore, was the need to understand their “objective” data in terms of a certain “subjective” framework, the need for a structural whole in order to make sense of those individual phenomena that could not be accounted for by the atomistic method.

Of possibly greater significance, though, was the central realization that there was no given objective framework in terms of which these parts could be understood. Soloveitchik points out that in the modern world, “scientists themselves differ in their employment of categorical apparatus” (*HM*, 22). Scientists work with a number of different “philosophical frames,” and the idea of a neutral framework through which the neutral subject views his object could no longer be taken for granted. Though the classical and modern scientist agreed, therefore, that the world was to be understood in terms of abstract quantitative categories rather than in terms of Aristotelian essences, it was only the quantum scientist who realized that this abstract framework did not reflect some objectively given reality, and thus different disciplines could work with different methods and frameworks. Moreover, for Soloveitchik, this realization on the part of the quantum physicists led to an appreciation of the fact that one’s theoretical framework determines to some extent the nature of the object being studied:

The claim of the natural sciences to absolute objectivity must undergo a thorough revision. . . . The pristine object, when intercepted by the experimenter, is transformed, chameleon-like, from transcendent imperviousness to immanent merger with the subject. (*HM*, 25)

What Soloveitchik here calls epistemological pluralism therefore allows the religious philosophers to interpret reality in terms of their own philosophical framework, one that is governed by their own goals and objectives. Thus, Soloveitchik writes:

Every system of cognition strives to attain a distinct objective. Systematic knowledge means the understanding and grasping of the universe in consonance with a definite *telos*. . . . Pluralism asserts only that the object reveals itself in manifold ways to the subject, and that a certain *telos*

corresponds to each of these ontical manifestations. Subsequently, the philosopher or scientist may choose one of the many aspects of reality in compliance with his goal. (*HM*, 16)

So it is thanks to the quantum physicists that religious philosophers can legitimately take an interest in the “structural whole,” the philosophical system behind the parts, and also posit their own such philosophical system in order to apprehend their own reality. Science itself had concluded that it could no longer be granted the exclusive right to call itself rational at the expense of all other approaches to cognition.

The most important methodological twist, though, arises when we ask how one apprehends this structural whole. For Soloveitchik does not accept that this “whole” can be approached directly. The attempt to “intuit” the essence of the religious experience is “a frank admission of defeat for reason” (*HM*, 51). According to Soloveitchik, therefore, we can only construct, or rather reconstruct, the required philosophical framework out of the objective scientific data that it is itself intended to explain. What we find here, therefore, in more general terms, is the insistence that we reconstruct the subjective whole out of the objective parts, the theory out of the observation.

While the parts are required, however, in order to form the whole, at the same time we have seen that the whole is required in order to account for behavior of the parts. We are led therefore into a circular method whereby we must simultaneously attempt to adjust the two mutually so as to arrive at a suitable equilibrium between them. The correct method is one that combines atomistic and holistic approaches. But as Soloveitchik notes, the point is that this is a package rather than two disparate methods:

The understanding of both nature and spirit is dualistic, both mosaic and structural—but (*and this is of enormous importance*) the mosaic and structural approaches are not two disparate methodological aspects which may be independently pursued: they form one organic whole. (*HM*, 60; emphasis added)

This description by Soloveitchik of the methods of the scientist who must use the “parts” (observations) to form the “whole” (theory) and yet can only understand certain parts in the first place in terms of that whole suggests that he is applying the well-known method of reflective equilibrium to theory construction.³⁴

The idea is that one constructs and justifies a theory of X by moving back and forth between one’s considered judgments about X and the theoretical principles

³⁴First described, to my knowledge, by Nelson Goodman (*Fact, Fiction and Forecast* [Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973] 64) as a “process of justification [that] is the delicate one of making mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences; and in the agreement lies the only justification needed for either.”

that one forms by considering them. Over recent decades the method of reflective equilibrium has been a popular method of forming ethical theories for justifying ethical practices. The most famous modern exponent of this is John Rawls, who uses the method to great effect in his *Theory of Justice*.³⁵ There the idea is that one forms the principles of a theory of justice out of our considered judgments about justice, i.e., those about which we are most certain.³⁶ At the same time, though, these principles that we form might actually show some of our considered judgments to be incorrect and therefore in need of revision. A theory is therefore only justified when it matches our considered judgments in a reflective equilibrium, not simply our initial considered judgments.

What has been found particularly attractive about this method in the ethical sphere is its nonfoundational nature. As Rawls explicitly states, the method does not rely upon any foundational “self-evident” true principles or judgments that are to bear the weight of justification. The existence of any such set of self-evidently true principles is seen to be too contentious to ground a theory. The method, therefore, does not attempt to justify ethical norms from some supposed Archimedean point. In reflective equilibrium, rather, the justificatory weight “rests upon the entire conception and how it fits with and organizes our considered judgments in reflective equilibrium.”³⁷ In principle, anything could be subject to revision, and the justification of theory and observation lies in the coherence of the package.

It is important to note that despite his general methodological comments, Soloveitchik’s actual application of this two-way method is highly circumscribed.³⁸ Though he does, I believe, utilize the method to a certain extent in the aggadic realm, many of his comments appear to insulate the halakhah from the practical ramifications of such a process.³⁹ Nonetheless, certain key characteristics of this method do find application throughout his work. Centrally, the claim that there is no Archimedean point from which we can judge the truth of a particular system leads us to a method by which we form our philosophical worldviews out of the considered judgments of the system itself. This inevitably yields a pluralistic picture

³⁵John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

³⁶A more detailed account of the nature of these considered judgments can be found in John Rawls, “Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics,” *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951) 177–97; and *A Theory of Justice*, 46–53.

³⁷Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 579.

³⁸I am grateful to Professor David Shatz for pointing this out to me, leading me to reevaluate my position on this matter. I intend to deal in more detail with Soloveitchik’s actual use and abuse of the method in a forthcoming article.

³⁹Examples of such reservations can be found in Soloveitchik’s “Mah Dodekh Mi-Dod,” in *Be-sod ha-Yachad ve-ha-Yachud* (ed. P. H. Peli; Jerusalem: Orot, 1976) 205–6; also in “U-Vik-kashtem Mi-Sham,” in *Ish ha-Halakhah Galuy ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organisation, 1979) 161–63.

of coherent systems that each gain a degree of autonomy in being released from the need to reduce themselves to universal common denominators.

But having established the right to base one's philosophy on the considered judgments of a system, the question that arises is, how are we to apply these methods to the philosophy of Judaism? What are the "considered judgments" from which the religious philosopher must begin in order to reconstruct his philosophy?

According to Wilhelm Dilthey, a thinker who merits explicit mention a number of times in Soloveitchik's writings,⁴⁰ the subjective mental life of a human being, which he termed *Erlebnis* (experience), is the source of all our action and thought. This experience has a seemingly natural tendency to force itself out into the objective realm. Dilthey's experience becomes public in what he calls "expressions," which can include any public manifestation of experience from facial expressions to works of art. Many of these expressions are permanently objectified and make up the mind-constructed world or objective mind, which is "a covering term for all modes of expression of human life as they manifest themselves in the external world."⁴¹ It is these concrete expressions of spirit that are the primary sources for those studying the humanities: individual and collective subjective experience can only be studied via the objective mind that makes that experience "accessible to knowledge."⁴²

We find similarly that what Soloveitchik calls "spirit" (rather than "experience") naturally exteriorizes itself, whether in actions or in the various products of those actions, be they artworks, buildings, or indeed, religious or metaphysical systems. Soloveitchik therefore similarly believed that in order to form a religious philosophy, we must begin from the objective concrete products of religious experience. Only in this way can we attain any degree of objectivity. And it is here that Orthodox Judaism comes into its own, for Soloveitchik maintains that in Judaism the concrete ethical and ritual norms of the halakhah form just such an objective order for study. The norms of the halakhah amount to a quantification of the subjective religious experience into something concrete for scientific or empirical study. Indeed, in a view which has its roots in the Brisker method of study mentioned earlier, whereby the halakhic system is the actualization of an abstract rational system of concepts and

⁴⁰Without speculating on the direct links that may or may not have existed between Soloveitchik and Dilthey, there are, I believe, strong conceptual links between their ideas. Moreover, the fact that Soloveitchik was a philosophy student at the University of Berlin from 1925 until 1931 and that Dilthey occupied the chair in philosophy at the same institution from 1882 until 1905 makes it inconceivable that Soloveitchik would not have been familiar with his thought.

⁴¹Rudolph Makreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 308.

⁴²Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Construction of the Historical World," in *Dilthey: Selected Writings* (ed. H. Rickman; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 194.

principles, Soloveitchik believes that the halakhah does not merely yield practical norms but embodies an entire philosophical *Weltanschauung*:

If the philosophy of religion asks for example how the *homo religiosus* interprets the concepts of time, space, causality, substance, ego, etc., then it would have to look into the objective series and examine norms, beliefs, articles of faith, religious texts etc. Out of this objectified material, the philosopher of religion may glean some hints regarding the structure of the most basic religious cognitive concepts. (*HM*, 99)

Generally, we see that for Soloveitchik, the practice of Judaism, widely conceived, is a Diltheyan “expression” that expresses a certain worldview in the presuppositions that its practical rules embody.⁴³

At this point we encounter the central difference between the manner in which religious philosophers treat their data and the manner in which natural scientists treat theirs. This stems from the central difference between the subject matter of the human and natural sciences: human behavior, unlike the “behavior” of natural objects, has an inner content that makes it meaningful; it has a certain semantic dimension. We do not attempt to understand the meaning of a stone falling as it does. We simply explain it by reference to a certain causal explanatory framework. Human behavior, however, is not to be understood as a *mere* mechanical phenomenon but is informed by a set of values and purposes that we must understand in order to comprehend the visible manifestations that we observe. Moreover, this “meaningful” aspect of behavior is not merely incidental to it. It is essential to understanding human action as such, for it is precisely this that makes something an action rather than a simple bodily movement. What this means, though, is that there is an important difference between the method of the scientist and the halakhist.

The claim is that scientists are only interested in the causal interrelations between the members of the quantified objective order that they study. The reconstructed whole that was necessary in order to understand the behavior of this objective order, however, is not an object of scientific study. It is not subject to the causal relations that interest scientists, and they are only interested in it insofar as it allows them to work with the individual processes within it. The actual “whole” itself for the scientist is “an empty phrase, not suitable for portraying nature as such” (*HM*, 58). In the realm of meaningful expressions, on the other hand, we are not interested in the causal relations between objective expressions. We are neither concerned with the causal relationship between the different practices of a religion, nor the causal relationship between the practices and the theory.

⁴³For the classic treatment of the idea that a system contains such fundamental assumptions or “constitutive meanings,” see Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” repr. in *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (ed. M. Martin and L. C. McIntyre; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994) 181–211.

This leads to the classic antinaturalist conclusion that understanding rather than causal explanation should be the focus of the social sciences, and for this the explanatory method is unsuited. What we must do in this sphere is to use the cognitive process of understanding in order to interpret the meaning of expressions. This understanding, again a central feature of the later work of Dilthey, is the common everyday process by which we understand things, rather than some form of technical specialization, though there are certainly techniques of interpretation that may need to be used to gain it.⁴⁴ The central antinaturalist claim, therefore, is that there is a form of interpretative understanding that is central to the social sciences, and that cannot be captured by the use of natural-scientific methods that involve subsumption under universal laws. As Soloveitchik writes:

A scientific law is universal and refers to the genus as a whole. The mathematical sciences operate with universals and not with particulars. . . . The humanist is concerned not only with the conceptual and universal, but with the concrete particular and individual. Mental reality is characterized by uniqueness and otherness. By reducing spiritual reality to common denominators we *eo ipso* empty it of its content. (*HM*, 32, 35)

Thus, the causal approach is to be replaced by a method of descriptive hermeneutics, basically a method of interpretivism that seems to be more appropriate to a realm in which we are concerned to discover what practices “mean.” We arrive therefore at the method that Soloveitchik calls descriptive reconstruction, a method in which philosophers must take a descriptive approach to the objective data with which the halakhah presents them.

The implications of this approach have been well described by Aviezer Ravitzky:

Halakhic activity is intended to acquire absolute autonomy, to create its ideal world, one which precedes any other reality . . . and which transcends any temporal alterations. The halakhic system is thus protected from any attempt at reduction to another realm. It is open to innovation, to constructive creativity, but these are meant to be conducted by means of its own unconditional transtemporal conceptual system.⁴⁵

By using the method of descriptive reconstruction, we form our worldview by the creation of autonomous halakhic concepts and principles that serve to organize

⁴⁴See Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical World,” 218–20. For discussion of the methods see Makreel, *Dilthey, Philosopher of the Human Studies*, part 3; Theodore Plantinga, *Historical Understanding in the Thought of Wilhelm Dilthey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) ch. 6; and H. P. Rickman, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Pioneer of the Human Studies* (London: University of California Press, 1979) ch. 10.

⁴⁵Aviezer Ravitzky, “Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik on Human Knowledge: Between Neo-Kantian and Maimonidean Philosophy,” *Modern Judaism* 6, no. 1 (1986) 158–59.

individual halakhot into a coherent system. Individual commandments must be interpreted in terms of the “unique autonomous norms” of the halakhah, rather than in terms imposed from without.

This autonomy is further reinforced when we look at what Soloveitchik has to say about the sort of descriptive content that he is looking for in the execution of his method. Thus, he is quite explicit in his rejection of intentionalist accounts of such content. According to the intentionalist account, the meaning of a text or text analogue is what the author had in mind when creating it. In order to find this meaning, therefore, we have to reconstruct this initial authorial intention.⁴⁶ According to Soloveitchik, though, the modern philosophy of religion

is not interested in the genetic approach to the religious act, nor does it raise the old problem of causality. It by-passes the “how” question and turns it over to explanatory psychology. (*HM*, 85–86)⁴⁷

Interestingly, it is not just the psychological approach that he is rejecting here, for Soloveitchik rejects any approach that attempts “the explanation of religious norms by antecedence” (*HM*, 86). Thus “we are not to look for any generating cause or goals” (*HM*, 94). This would rule out even the more modern intentionalist theories that focus on what the agent in question was doing by acting a certain way rather than on a literal act of psychological reconstruction. Soloveitchik, it seems, would reject an interpretation that lays bare the intentional context giving the reasons behind these acts. The “why” question is simply not his concern. It is the “what” of the commandments that the religious philosopher must attempt to discover. Any attempt to retrace the causal antecedence of the commandments, whether in terms of psychological reenactment or in terms of aims and goals misses out on their most important aspects:

[T]he causalistic method invariably leads to circumrotary explanation and never to penetrative description. The enumeration of causes . . . discloses the “what has gone before” but never the “is” of the subject matter. (*HM*, 98)

⁴⁶The intentionalist account of linguistic meaning finds its most famous expression in Paul Grice, “Meaning,” *Philosophical Review* 66 (1957) 377–88. In application to texts, Collingwood is one of the main proponents of the view that the meaning of an act is to be identified with the inner psychological experiences that occurred in the author’s mind, which we have to reenact. See R. G. Collingwood, “Human Nature and Human History,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (ed. M. Martin and L. C. McIntyre; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994) 163–71.

⁴⁷Indeed, despite Soloveitchik’s generally negative attitude to Maimonides’ negative theology, he does seem to agree that in this sphere we cannot look to uncover God’s “intentions.” See Abraham R. Besdin, “May We Interpret Hukkim?” in *Man of Faith in the Modern World*, vol. 2 of *Reflections of the Rav* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1989) 91–99, esp. 93.

The focal problem is of a descriptive nature; What is the religious act? What is its structure, context and meaning? (*HM*, 86)

What we see Soloveitchik endorsing therefore is a hermeneutic theory, most fully developed by Hans Georg Gadamer in recent times, though again found in its embryonic form in the later work of Dilthey.⁴⁸ For Dilthey, “investigating the human studies is more like finding the meaning of a poem than like researching in physics or chemistry.”⁴⁹ Gadamer develops this idea further in arguing that rather than the generating conditions of meaningful expressions, it is the substantive meaning that one is referring to when one says that one has understood the meaning of a theorem or a piece of music that is of interest for the human sciences. Gadamer’s central point here is that before we can explain why someone produces an expression, we must understand what that expression means. As Peter Winch points out, “Unless there is a form of understanding that is not the result of explanation, no such thing as explanation would be possible.”⁵⁰ This understanding of truth content or *die Sache*, as Gadamer refers to it, yields the “what” rather than the “why” of the expressions.

But according to this Gadamerian account, such meaning is found in the relation between a text and its interpreter. For an intentionalist, the agent produces meaning, but once it is produced the meaning exists independently and does not itself depend on an interpreting subject for its existence. For Gadamer, though, meaning only comes about when the subject confronts the expression in question. Thus, whereas in intentionalism the meaning is found in the intentions of the author, lying complete and ready to be discovered, for Gadamer meaning is not found in the expression alone, but is created in the confrontation between the expression and the interpreter. Meaning, therefore, does not exist independently of the interpreting subject, as it does for the intentionalists, but comes about as the result of the dyadic relation between text and interpreter.

Moreover, all interpreters arrive with certain perspectives or “horizons” that influence the way they interpret the expression. These form the given scheme within which they perform their acts of interpretation. In that case, though, meaning cannot be simply identified with the intentions of the author and cannot be seen as something objectively “out there” awaiting discovery. Rather, meaning becomes multivalent. Different interpreters with their different horizons will find different meanings in a certain expression.

⁴⁸For a fuller, though still introductory, treatment of the two accounts of meaning discussed here, see Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) ch. 7.

⁴⁹Rickman, *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, 10.

⁵⁰Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (2d ed.; London: Routledge, 1990) x.

In this form, the hermeneutic theory of meaning seems to lead to relativism.⁵¹ If the meaning of anything depends to such an extent on the horizons of the interpreting subject, then surely different subjects with different horizons will find different meanings in phenomena. With reference to interpreting practices, how do we judge whether we have justified our practice? We can only appeal to the interpretation that makes sense of the originally obscure phenomena. But how are we to convince others of the sense of this interpretation? We can only show the imaginary interlocutors how the meaning that we have given coheres with the system of meanings of which it is a part. We can therefore take them on an interpretative journey through the system, exhibiting how it all fits together. But if they are not parties to the system in which all the various meanings are implicated, then no appeal to the other parts of the system is going to convince them. We cannot get beyond our own hermeneutic circle and convince our interlocutors if they are unwilling to enter its circumference. Thus, again we immediately allow for a pluralistic universe of meanings corresponding to all the various different systems, and we have no way of breaking out of our own interpretative circles in order to test their objective validity. The interpretation cannot be judged from some putative neutral standpoint and may therefore to an extent remain impenetrable to those who are not adherents of the particular worldview under consideration. One might attempt to portray that worldview in a coherent fashion to those outside of it, but such an interpretative trip is unlikely to convince an outside observer of the truth of the system.

All of this, it seems to me, leads us directly to the conclusions that Soloveitchik reaches in "Confrontation." The method of descriptive reconstruction that begins with the assumption that there is no Archimedean point by which to judge the relative merits of various systems is a philosophical approach that questions the imposition of universal categories of thought on different systems and their reduction to common denominators. And Soloveitchik's use of descriptive hermeneutics in order to penetrate the depths of the religious consciousness reflects an antinaturalist approach to the human sciences, similarly justifiable on philosophical grounds, that erects further barriers to the mutual understanding of different religious systems. While it hardly needs stating that these philosophical methods have their problems, and Soloveitchik himself does not deal with their limits, they are nonetheless philosophical methods of engagement. And what this means is that Soloveitchik's conclusions in "Confrontation" need not simply be construed as a function of pragmatism or religious conservatism. On the contrary, they exhibit an intellectual integrity that follows from his deepest philosophical convictions.

⁵¹Or at the very least, perspectivism, though for our purposes it is not necessary to detail the manner in which it might lead to either or the distinctions between the two.

■ Conclusions

The conclusions that we can draw regarding both “Confrontation” itself and our brief examination of Soloveitchik’s philosophical methodology appear to converge on one point. Soloveitchik does indeed limit interfaith dialogue to the sphere of universal ethical and social concerns, ruling out, or at the very least severely limiting, the possibility of genuine theological dialogue. The key question, however, is what dictates these limits?

Before addressing this question directly, it is worth noting that while Soloveitchik undoubtedly places these strictures on interfaith dialogue, from the perspective of pure theory his stance need not necessarily rule out the explanation of one’s theological system to the adherents of another faith. It would, though, imply that such explanations are likely to take the form of monologues rather than dialogues, and participants should not be expected to yield to the claims of other religions in this sphere.

Interestingly, of course, there is no necessary reason for such expectations to form the basis of interfaith dialogue. For Soloveitchik, a lack of common denominators dictates that the relationship with God mediated by the particularistic aspects of a religion is “personal . . . [and] discussion will in no way enhance or hallow these emotions.”⁵² Moreover, the attempt to find such commonality where none in fact exists can only serve to distort one’s understanding of a particular religion. Thus Soloveitchik writes that “we will not question, defend, offer apologies, analyze or rationalize our faith in dialogues centered about these ‘private’ topics.”⁵³ Yet according to Leora Batnitzky, Soloveitchik’s near contemporary Franz Rosenzweig believed that interfaith dialogue need neither lead to, nor be predicated upon, theological commonality at all. Indeed, the very possibility of dialogue is “premiered on real difference, and this means that the dialogue aims not at consensus, but rather at changing each partner’s view of herself.”⁵⁴ Thus, dialogue “produces not mutual understanding, but the harsh and harrowing assessment of one point of view over and against another.”⁵⁵ On this view, mutual understanding would actually signal the end of Judaism and Christianity, each of which is defined by its judgments against the other.

Nonetheless, on Rosenzweig’s view each has something to gain from dialogue with the other. Judaism’s rejection of Christianity serves to confirm Christians’ commitment to their own universal mission since the recognition of Jewish particularity is a constant reminder of the unfulfilled nature of that mission. And similarly

⁵²Soloveitchik, “On Interfaith Relationships,” 78.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁴Leora Batnitzky, “Dialogue as Judgment, Not Mutual Affirmation: A New Look at Franz Rosenzweig’s Dialogical Philosophy,” *Journal of Religion* 79 (1999) 523–44, at 524.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

Christianity's rejection of Judaism ultimately serves to reinforce Judaism's commitment to its own particularity. While the precise reasoning behind all of this is beyond the scope of this article, it is significant that for Rosenzweig the very lack of common denominators in dialogue enhances each faith community's commitment to its own faith.

It could therefore be argued that Soloveitchik's restrictions on interfaith dialogue are based on certain underlying assumptions about its nature that are not universally shared. And it might even be possible to trace a route from these assumptions to a certain Lithuanian insularity, at least inasmuch as Soloveitchik shows no awareness of this other contemporaneous model for dialogue that does not run the sort of reductive risks that he fears.⁵⁶

Our central argument, however, is that for Soloveitchik, as indeed for Rosenzweig, there is a direct philosophical path to the idea that one's faith experience might be incommunicable, rendering theological interfaith dialogue futile. In Soloveitchik's case, we have argued that it follows from a commitment to two specific approaches for which viable philosophical cases can be made, those of descriptive reconstruction and antinaturalism. At the same time, though, there are genuine concerns about the efficacy of these methods. Thus, the autonomy one gains as a result of the method of descriptive reconstruction is achieved, it might be argued, by utilizing an entirely circular method that can only allow for the justification of the halakhic system by the particular logic of that system. Most simply put, this criticism can be seen to arise from the very fact that Soloveitchik says that his method is descriptive: how can the mere description of the scheme implicit in a set of norms justify them? Soloveitchik's methods therefore do have a built-in conservatism. It would surely misrepresent Soloveitchik, however, to portray such conservatism as the straightforward traditionalism of a Lithuanian *rosh yeshiva*.

Moreover, the reverse of this conservatism is a rather radical form of relativism. For if we cannot find an objective grounding for our interpretation, we are left with a completely relativistic epistemology according to which all interpretations of the world are legitimate. Soloveitchik's approach seems to lead us to a highly untraditional conclusion regarding the radical contingency of one's understanding of (and possibly therefore commitment to) Judaism.⁵⁷ His methodology, therefore, can be seen to betray both traditional and nontraditional tendencies.

⁵⁶I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this paper for suggesting this line of inquiry and pointing me in the direction of Batnitzky's article.

⁵⁷Although Soloveitchik insists that the Jewish philosophy that he is advocating is a cognitive matter that is resistant to such relativism, how we are supposed to judge the superiority of any one system once we have accepted Soloveitchik's methodology is left rather obscure. Moreover, as Kolbrener ("Towards a Genuine Jewish Philosophy," 196) notes, "the halakhic mind eschews certainty in interpretation, his triumph is in proving that the quest for meaning in interpretation is unending."

What this ought to do is leave us with a rather more nuanced understanding of Soloveitchik than is allowed for by those who would claim him for either the modernists or traditionalists. For the mistake that both sides appear to make is the assumption that we can categorize each of Soloveitchik's arguments or conclusions as a clear indicator of one or the other. Such a view, it seems to me, reflects a very naive understanding of the complexities of his thought, according to which one can place each facet of it into a neat package that is either exclusively "Modern" or exclusively "Orthodox."

While Soloveitchik's conclusions in "Confrontation" are often therefore portrayed as an example of his staunch traditionalism, we have argued that in fact they can be seen as flowing from a rather modern set of philosophical considerations.⁵⁸ Moreover, those philosophical considerations can themselves be seen as having implications that are either inherently conservative or radically relativistic. Thus, when unravelling the thought of Soloveitchik, the argument regarding his modernity or Orthodoxy often leads more to obfuscation than illumination. It is the complex interplay between these two poles that in fact defines his thought, both in the particular example of "Confrontation" and more generally.

⁵⁸It is worth noting in this regard Moshe Sokol's later piece in which he modifies some views presented in the article that he coauthored with Singer and writes that "the choices [Soloveitchik] made to retain the past were themselves highly personalized expressions of his own special brand of modernity." See Moshe Sokol, "'Ger ve-Toshav Anokhi': Modernity and Traditionalism in the Life and Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik," repr. in *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1997) 125–43, at 125–26.