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Heschel's Monotheism vis-à-vis Pantheism and Panentheism

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In the Jewish tradition, there is no claim about God more hallowed than the *Sh'ma*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (Dt 6:4). Naturally, then, it is the foundation of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's religious world view. Heschel echoes the tradition in claiming that the *Sh'ma* means not simply that there is only one true God, but also that God possesses inner unity, which, in turn, is the necessary precondition for whatever unity is achieved in this world.¹

Pantheism is one way of explaining unity in the world. In the strictest sense of the term, pantheism is the belief that the world is divine (literally, all is God). This can be understood to mean that there is no more to God than the world, or it can mean that the world is an emanation (in contrast to a creation) of God. In this emanationist version of pantheism, which is often referred to as panentheism, the world is divine without being all there is to the divine. In a non-literal sense of the term, pantheism can refer to the belief that the unity of the world or the unifying power of the world is God.

Heschel emphatically rejects pantheism as alien to Judaism: "To Judaism, the adoration of nature is as absurd as the alienation from nature is unnecessary."² So with full appreciation of the sublime mystery of nature, a major theme in his writings, Heschel affirms the reality of God as distinct from, though intimately present to, the world that God creates and loves.

¹ The oneness of God is a theme that pervades Heschel's writings, but see especially chapter 12, "What We Mean by the Divine," and chapter 13, "One God," of his *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951), 97-123.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955), 90.

This distinction between the sublime mystery of nature and the presence of God is crucial because upon it rests the distinction between pantheism and monotheism. As indicated, there is no doubt where Heschel himself stands: "Beyond the grandeur is God," and while "God is a mystery, the mystery is not God."³ Stated otherwise, beyond transcendence is the Transcendent Other; beyond the holy dimension of the universe is the Holy One.

This is a distinction overlooked in many contemporary theological writings where terms like "mystery," "transcendence," "the holy," and "the sacred" are often used as synonyms for "God." While each of these words partially indicates the meaning of God, each also can be used to describe an aspect of worldly reality. From Heschel's perspective, for example, to perceive holiness is to perceive an allusion to God, to experience holiness is to come into the presence of the Holy, but holy things and persons are not parts of God.

Yet even Heschel himself in one instance seems to speak of "the holy dimension of all existence" and "God" interchangeably or synonymously. This occurs in a section of *Man Is Not Alone* titled "The Holy Dimension": "What gives rise to faith is . . . an everlasting fact in the universe, . . . *the holy dimension* of all existence. . . . All existence stands in the dimension of the holy and nothing can be conceived as living outside of it. All existence stands before God – here and everywhere, now and at all times."⁴ Since, for Heschel, Jewish faith is a response to God, and since here he speaks of "the holy dimension of all existence," described as "an everlasting fact in the universe," as giving rise to faith, it seems that in this instance he is articulating a pantheistic, or at least a panentheistic, perspective.

³ *Ibid.*, 97, 66.

⁴ *Man Is Not Alone*, 237.

But elsewhere, reflecting his more consistent stance, Heschel speaks of God as “more than the holy dimension” and, therefore, as “a reality higher than the universe.”⁵ For Heschel, God is the Transcendent One who, while present to the world and in the world, is never part of the world. Thus, in commenting on the biblical passage “the whole earth is full of His glory,” Heschel writes: “It does not mean that the glory fills the earth in the way in which ether fills space or water fills the ocean. It means that the whole earth is full of His presence.”⁶ Elsewhere he reiterates this point: “In saying God is everywhere, we do not intend to say He is like the air, the parts of which are found in countless places. . . . God is not partly here and partly there; He is all here and all there.”⁷

In fact, as the Transcendent One, God is even more than the “one supreme force or law that regulates all phenomena of nature.”⁸ According to Heschel, “to refer to the supreme law of nature as God or to say that the world came into being by virtue of its own energy is to beg the question”⁹ of why there is such a law at all. God is not the supreme law of nature but the reason there is such a law. Likewise, Heschel

⁵ Ibid., 67. Interestingly, in this section where Heschel speaks of God as “more than the holy dimension” he also use the phrase “the divine aspect of the universe” in conjunction with “the holy dimension.” This is an exceptional use of the word “divine” for Heschel who normally uses the word as a synonym for God. This unusual use of “divine” helps to explain another perplexing statement that Heschel makes on page 126 of *Man Is Not Alone*: “God is more than the divine.” Recognizing that Heschel is not perfectly consistent in his usage of the word “divine” lends plausibility to the argument I am about to advance that in the section “The Holy Dimension,” in which he speaks of “divine values invested in every being,” Heschel does not intend to equate the holy dimension of the universe with God.

⁶ *God In Search of Man*, 82.

⁷ *Man Is Not Alone*, 121.

⁸ Ibid., 107.

⁹ Ibid.

declares categorically that “God is one, but one [or oneness] is not God.”¹⁰ For him, to deify the unity of the world or even the unifying power within nature is, again, to beg the question of why there is a world and a unifying force within it. Monotheism, in contrast to pantheism, does not evade this ultimate question, and in response it offers its doctrine of creation: the world is the creation of the God who transcends the world, and unity within creation presupposes unity within the Creator.¹¹

Why, then, does Heschel, strict monotheist that he is, allow himself to sound pantheistic in the section titled “The Holy Dimension”? Does he for a moment really blur the distinction between transcendence and the Transcendent One, between the holy dimension of the universe and the Holy One? I think not. Instead, I think it is reasonable to conclude that Heschel never intended to suggest that God is the holy dimension of the universe, and I think there are at least two ways that his apparent pantheistic moment can be explained as merely that – apparent.

In the first place, it may be that rather than using the terms “God and “the holy dimension” synonymously or interchangeably, Heschel is simply alternating between speaking of the holy dimension and of God in such a way as to unwittingly suggest their synonymy. But this would not explain why he calls the holy dimension “an everlasting fact in the universe” that “gives rise to faith,” unless we realize that while faith is a response to God, it is not only God that gives rise to faith. The holy dimension of the universe can be said to give rise to faith in the sense that it calls forth those attitudes like wonder, awe, and reverence which are antecedents of faith in God.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Ibid., 112.

Another possible explanation of Heschel's apparent pantheistic moment is that in different contexts, and perhaps even in the same context, he uses the term "dimension" differently. Thus, where Heschel says that "God is more than the holy dimension" he is using the word "dimension" as a synonym for the word "aspect," the holy dimension of the universe being the holy aspect of the universe. But where Heschel suggests the synonymy of "the holy dimension" and "God" he is using "dimension" to mean "sphere," that sphere being the presence or glory of God. Thus Heschel speaks of the glory of God as "an aura that lies about all being, a spiritual setting of reality,"¹² and he points out that "the awareness of God as the dwelling-place of the universe must have been very poignant in post-biblical times, if *Makom* ('place') was a synonym for God."¹³ Thus, to say that God is the holy dimension of the universe is to say that God is the "dwelling-place" of the universe. The universe dwells not on its own but in the presence of God. Beyond the universe is not an abyss of nothingness but the glory of God. The Holy One is our Holy Domain.

In this connection it is interesting to note that Franklin Sherman, though not discussing Heschel's use of "the holy dimension," in interpreting the Hasidic understanding of God which Heschel imbibed, refers to God as "a dimensional reality."¹⁴ However, while Sherman is correct to interpret Heschel's Hasidic-inspired view of God as a dimensional reality, it is misleading for him to suggest that "if this were all that were said, one might well charge this view with being essentially pantheistic."¹⁵ Sherman realizes that there is more to be said, that God is not only a dimensional reality

¹² *God In Search of Man*, 85.

¹³ *Man Is Not Alone*, 150.

¹⁴ Franklin Sherman, *The Promise of Heschel* (Philadelphia: A. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

but that "God, who is truly present, also is transcendent."¹⁶ The reason I maintain that Sherman's qualification is misleading is because God, as a dimensional reality in Heschel's Hasidic sense, is a dimension other than a dimension of the world. Rather than suggesting that God is a dimensional reality who *also* is transcendent, thus implying that as a dimensional reality God is coextensive with the world and that as a transcendent reality God is beyond the world, it is more accurate to suggest that even as a dimensional reality God is transcendent. To say that God is a dimensional reality is not a pantheistic statement as long as "dimension" is understood as a reality distinct from the world.¹⁷ Rather than suggest that God is *both* dimensional *and* transcendent, it is better to say that God is the dimensional Transcendent or the Transcendent Dimension.

Due to Heschel's emphasis that God is present in all beings and that all beings dwell within the sphere of God, some of his readers describe his religious perspective as

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁷ It must be acknowledged that there is proclivity toward pantheism (or, more correctly, panentheism) in many Hasidic writings, particularly those of the Habad school, and this is indeed because of the Hasidic stress on the immanence of God. But the Hasidic view of God's immanence, which according to Sherman can be called "a dimensional reality," need not (and in most cases should not) be interpreted to mean that God's presence generally is viewed by the Hasidim as a dimension of worldly reality. Therefore, the emphasis in Hasidic writings on the immanence of God or on God's presence as a dimensional reality in which the world dwells need not be considered "essentially pantheistic" – even "if this were all that were to be said." No, God's immanence (or dimensional presence) is normally understood in Hasidism as a reality distinct from worldly reality. Moreover, and more importantly for this essay, I maintain that however much Hasidic writings are tinged with pantheism (or panentheism) there is no such coloring to Heschel's Hasidic-inspired view. Furthermore, no matter how much Heschel is steeped in the Hasidic tradition, his view of God's immanent presence as a dimensional reality could have just as well been nurtured by the earlier rabbinic tradition which, as we have seen, regarded God as the "dwelling-place" of the world.

“panentheistic,” which they suggest is distinct from a pantheistic perspective. In fact, one of Heschel’s foremost interpreters, Fritz Rothschild, says that “the awareness of . . . God’s *glory* ubiquitously sensed in and behind all things leads to a *panentheistic* outlook.”¹⁸ By this Rothschild may mean that Heschel perceives all created reality as existing within the sphere of God’s presence and that God’s presence permeates all things – and that is precisely Heschel’s view. However, since the term “panentheistic” is often used to suggest that everything exists in God as part of God, it is perhaps misleading to use this term to describe Heschel’s religious outlook.¹⁹

To support his interpretation, Rothschild refers to the fact that Heschel has translated a letter of a Habad Hasid, the message of which is “All is God.” Rothschild claims, as Heschel himself notes, that this message “differs from pantheism because the phrase is not reversible into ‘God is the All (the Universe.)’”²⁰ Now while it is true that this message clearly differs from the strictest definition of pantheism, which is the view that the world and God are coextensive (that not only the universe is God, but that God is the universe, with no remainder), it does not *prima facie*

¹⁸ Fritz A. Rothschild, “Introduction,” *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism from the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel* (New York: The Free Press, revised edition, 1975), 17.

¹⁹ The term “panentheism” is used variously by various authors, as is evident, e.g., in the book *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World*, eds. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), but since the term is usually understood to mean, in the words the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, “the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in Him,” I find it problematic to refer to Heschel’s theology as panentheistic without dissociating it from the common sense of the term.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 73.

differ from the emanationist version of pantheism or from panentheism as it is popularly understood. In fact, it appears to be a radically emanationist or panentheistic statement, claiming that the universe is part of God, even if God is greater than the universe. But is this really what the Hasidic statement means? And even if it does mean this, does the fact that Heschel translated this letter in his book *Man’s Quest for God* mean that he himself endorses panentheism? Notice that the point of Heschel’s including the letter in his book is not to affirm the belief that All is God but to show that prayer is the way to insight and faith, to show that the insight or belief that All is God was reached by way of ardent prayer, as the author of the letter himself attests. Heschel’s reason for including the letter in his book is made clear by the sentences which immediately precede it: “Prayer is a way to faith. Some of mankind’s deepest spiritual insights are born in moments of prayer. The following letter may serve as an illustration.”²¹ Then comes the letter on how prayer led to the insight that All is God.

From all that we have seen, it can be emphatically maintained that Heschel’s perspective is not panentheistic in the usual sense of the term, just as it is not pantheistic. Heschel does not think of the world as being a part of the reality of God. Rather, he views the world as being embraced and imbued by the presence of God, a presence which remains distinct from the world itself. Heschel’s normative statement in this regard is: “The world is not of the essence of God. . . .The world is neither His continuation nor His emanation but rather His creation and possession.”²² In other words, “the world is His, but He is not His world.”²³

²¹ *Man’s Quest for God*, 72.

²² *Ibid.*, 121; cf. *God In Search of Man*, 97, where Heschel says that “Nature is not a part of God but a fulfillment of His will.”

²³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “God, Torah, and Israel,” in *Theology and Church in Times of Change: Essays in Honor of John Coleman Bennett*,

Moreover, from the footnote that Heschel adds to the statement "All is God," it is clear that even this statement is not taken to mean that everything is a part of God. For in that note Heschel says: "In a true sense, therefore, the world that we know is nothing *compared with* the Power of God that contains it."²⁴ In other words, according to the Habad teaching as Heschel interprets it, to say that "All is God" is to say that, in a sense, God alone is truly real. This is confirmed by the fact that elsewhere in the same letter the author says "that there is nothing but He alone, that all is God."²⁵ Rather than taking this to mean that everything is in God as part of God, this statement can be interpreted as expressing an experience and an insight akin to what Rudolf Otto, in his classic work *The Idea of the Holy*, describes as "creature consciousness": the consciousness of a creature "overwhelmed by its own nothingness *in contrast to* that which is supreme above all creatures."²⁶

Yet even if Heschel would agree that we have a sense of our own nothingness in comparison with God, this is not a major or recurrent theme in his writings. For him, religious experience within the biblical tradition goes beyond Otto's "creature consciousness," instead promoting a sense that,

eds. Edward LeRoy Long, Jr. and Robert T. Handy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 81.

²⁴ *Man's Quest for God*, 73 (emphasis mine).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 74. It must be admitted that Habad thought also lends itself to a panentheistic interpretation and that the claim "All is God" can be understood not simply to mean that "the world we know is nothing compared with the Power of God" but that nothing exists outside God, that the world we know is a part of God or is derived from God as a result of emanation. But even if Habad thought can be interpreted in this way, the point I wish to make is that Heschel himself does not interpret the particular Habad letter in question in this way and that he does not refer to it in order to endorse or elaborate a panentheistic viewpoint.

²⁶ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 10 (emphasis mine).

as "a partner, a factor in the life of God," each of us is "beyond the level of mere creature."²⁷ "What is decisive," says Heschel about our sense of self-worth in relation to God, "is not the acceptance of our own bankruptcy [nothingness], but, on the contrary, the realization of our great spiritual power, the power to heal what is broken in the world, the realization of our capacity to answer God's question."²⁸ Thus, *comparing ourselves with God* we may be overwhelmed by a sense of our own nothingness, yet *contemplating our relatedness to God* we may be uplifted by a sense of our transcendent dignity.

While such a perspective implies an "analogy between Creator and creature,"²⁹ Heschel does not subscribe to the view that creation is part of the Creator. It therefore seems inappropriate to describe Heschel's theology as panentheistic, unless the term itself is redefined to mean that all creation exists within the domain of God's presence, which does not distinguish it from forms of monotheism that, like Heschel's, emphasize the all-embracing, though not all-inclusive, presence of God. While Rothschild does not distinguish what he calls Heschel's panentheistic perspective from the more common understanding of panentheism as the belief that all reality is part of God, he does point out that Heschel emphasizes "the experience of the *transcendent* God whose voice speaks to the living. . . ."³⁰ What is questionable, however, is Rothschild's suggestion that while "the awareness of God's *voice* . . . leads to a view of God as *transcendent*," "the awareness . . . of God's *glory* ubiquitously sensed in and behind all things leads to a *panentheistic*

²⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 226.

²⁸ *Man Is Not Alone*, 73.

²⁹ *The Prophets*, 229.

³⁰ *Between God and Man*, 17.

outlook,³¹ implying that the glory is not as transcendent as the “voice,” or that the awareness of the glory does not also yield a vision of God as transcendent. Yet, for Heschel, the glory of God is as transcendent as God’s word. The phrases “glory of God” and “word of God” (or “voice of God”) metaphorically express the presence and revelation of the transcendent God. Both “presence” and “revelation” are terms which suggest the immanence of God. But even as immanent, God transcends the world. It is therefore misleading to suggest that the God whose glory is “in and behind all things” is *also* transcendent, since it is precisely as transcendent that the glory is in and behind all things. In Heschel’s words, “God remains transcendent in His immanence and related in His transcendence.”³²

Rothschild is not the only scholar to call Heschel’s outlook panentheistic. On the basis of another of Heschel’s statements, Maurice Friedman claims that “Heschel’s philosophy is not a pantheism, but a panentheism.”³³ When torn from its context, the statement on which Friedman focuses does indeed sound panentheistic: “God means: *Togetherness of all beings in holy otherness.*”³⁴ This is not, however, the same as saying “God *is* the togetherness of all beings in holy otherness. While the words “means” and “is” are often interchangeable, the context of the statement with which we are concerned shows that in this case to say “God *means* the togetherness of all beings” is not the same as saying “God *is* the togetherness of all beings.” This is evident as soon as we read the sentences which precede

³¹ Ibid.

³² *The Prophets*, 486.

³³ Maurice Friedman, “Abraham Joshua Heschel: Toward a Philosophy of Judaism,” *Conservative Judaism* 10:2 (Winter 1956), 4, and “Divine Need and Human Wonder: The Philosophy of Abraham J. Heschel,” *Judaism* 25:1 (Winter 1976):69.

³⁴ *Man Is Not Alone*, 109.

and follow the one in question. Those sentences are: “God means: No one is ever alone. . .” and “God means: What is behind our soul is beyond our spirit; what is the source of ourselves is the goal of our ways.” Obviously, the word “is” would be meaningless in place of the word “means” in these sentences.³⁵ Heschel’s point in these sentences is not to say what God is but what it means for us to be related to God. On the very same page, however, there is one “God is” sentence, and here it is clear that God is *not* the togetherness of all beings but the One who unites all beings: “God is He who holds our fitful lives together. . . .”

God, according to Heschel, is not the “cosmic or all-inclusive whole” of Charles Hartshorne’s panentheistic process philosophy.³⁶ Heschel would not say, with Hartshorne, “God is the wholeness of the world.”³⁷ Nor with John B. Cobb, another self-acknowledged panentheistic process philosopher, would Heschel say “we are parts of God.”³⁸ Even Heschel’s statement that God is “*being in and beyond all beings*”³⁹ should not be read in a panentheistic sense because, for Heschel, while God’s being is within all beings, it is not in them as a part of them, and all beings are not parts of God’s being. In Heschel’s words: “God is not all in all. He is in all beings but He is *not* all beings.”⁴⁰ And in

³⁵ That Friedman misinterprets Heschel by taking “God means” to be synonymous with “God is” is indicated not only by the fact that Friedman claims that Heschel’s philosophy is panentheistic, but also by the fact that he explicitly says that Heschel favors “an understanding of God as ‘togetherness of all beings in holy otherness’” (“Divine Need and Human Wonder,” 77; emphasis mine).

³⁶ Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1967), 7.

³⁷ Ibid., 6.

³⁸ John B. Cobb, *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 79.

³⁹ *Man Is Not Alone*, 78.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 148.

another unequivocally monotheistic statement concerning both the otherness and the intimate relatedness of God, Heschel writes: "It is His otherness, ineffable and immediate as the air we breathe and do not see, which enables us to sense His distant nearness."⁴¹

In Heschel's monotheistic world view, then, while God does not *include* the world, God does *embrace* the world, which means that "all existence is coexistence with God."⁴² Therefore, "we are not told to decide between 'Either-Or,'

either God or the world," but "to accept Either and Or, God and the world."⁴³ There are pantheists and panentheists who suggest that monotheism, as opposed to the idea of a divine universe, leads to human separation from nature and even to human disregard and mistreatment of the things of this world. But the demand of authentic monotheistic faith, like that espoused by Heschel, is precisely the opposite – it is the demand to acknowledge "the sacred relevance of all being" and "to keep aflame our awareness of living in the great fellowship of all beings."⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Man Is Not Alone*, 122.

⁴² *Man Is Not Alone*, 240.

⁴³ *Who Is Man?*, 93.

⁴⁴ *Man Is Not Alone*, 94 and 226.