

Introduction

The topic of this book is “creation.” It breaks down into discussions of two distinct, but interrelated, questions: What does the universe look like, and what is its origin? Answers to the first belong to “cosmology,” and answers to the second to “cosmogony.” Responses to both questions necessarily are speculative, since, in principle, there is no way to base an answer on direct experience. All human beings are part of the universe in both time and space. With respect to time, there always was a time before and there always will be a time after what anyone can experience. Similarly with respect to space, everyone is located within the universe. Hence, there is no vantage point from which anyone can see how the universe began or what the universe as a whole looks like. The best we can do is use what we know to infer answers to both questions about creation. Yet, there is no reason why there should be any legitimacy to this logical move. The universe may have been entirely different at its origin than it became afterwards. Similarly, the characteristics of the universe as a whole may be entirely different from the characteristics of any of its parts. Consequently, no answers to questions about creation can be called “knowledge.” At best they are “good stories,” i.e., imaginative and/or informed opinions.

The opinions about creation to be considered in this book come from the Hebrew scriptures, Greek philosophy, Jewish philosophy and contemporary physics. As such the perspective in this work is Jewish, liberal and philosophical. It is “Jewish” because the foundation of the discussion is biblical texts that are interpreted in the light of traditional rabbinic texts. It is

“philosophy” because the subject matter is important in both past and present philosophical texts in general, and to Jewish philosophy in particular. Finally, it is “liberal” because the authorities consulted include heterodox as well as orthodox Jewish sources.

THE LIMITS OF HUMAN REASON

How the universe began matters to me because it is a fundamental dogma of Judaism, but also because it is in and of itself an important question for two different (but related) reasons. First, to know myself includes knowing how I am a part of the universe, and to understand the universe involves knowledge of its origin as well as its end. To say the same thing in a slightly different way, the origin of the universe is not an event in the past at time zero. As the killing of Lincoln is a single act that at least spans the moment that John Wilkes Booth pulled the trigger to the moment of Lincoln’s death, so the creation of the universe is a single act that spans the moment of its origin to its end. Second, to know God includes knowing creation. As a consequence of his radical unity, God has a single act with a single product, and there is no distinction between God as agent, his act, and the product of his activity. In other words, the creator is the act of creation, which in turn is the created world.

While I want to know creation, I also recognize that, from any absolutist perspective, I never will know it. Perfect knowledge always remains a limit-ideal, where to know is pictured as an asymptote. The use of this mathematical characterization is modern, but not the claim about the limits of knowledge itself. Every text examined in this book consistently affirms that creation is more or less but never completely knowable. Timaeus, like Pythagoras, could not avoid positing an element of the irrational in his construction of the physical world. Since “1” is the unit measure, the hypotenuse of his elementary isosceles right triangle has a length of $\sqrt{2}$. Similarly, one adjacent side of his elementary half-equilateral scalene right triangle has a length of $\sqrt{3}$. Both are irrational numbers. These

facts in themselves were sufficient motive for him to insist that the universe cannot be only a rational place generated by the mind of the deity. Similarly, while Ibn Daud and Maimonides considered their stated cosmology to be the most reasonable picture of the universe, they did not consider it to be knowledge. Rather, they maintained that in principle human science could attain nothing more certain than probable opinions in this area. Only Gersonides believed that the creation of the universe could be demonstrated. However, no facts were at stake in this issue. The data from astronomy led Ibn Daud and Maimonides to conclude that human beings have no knowledge whatsoever in this area. Gersonides argued that this conclusion is too strong. Certainly there is a difference between human and divine knowledge. What God knows as a cause of the object known in a single act is knowable to human beings only as an effect of the object known through what could be expressible only in an infinite conjunction of distinct propositions. While human knowledge has divine knowledge as its goal, this end can only be approximated. Ibn Daud and Maimonides would not consider “approximate” truth to be knowledge; Gersonides did.

To know what is approximately but not definitively true is to know a story. All of the accounts of creation considered in this book, including that of modern physics, are a story. None of them can purport to be a detailed, literal explanation of the origin of the universe. In the *Timaeus* Plato offered as proof that an ideal state can be made actual, the claim that the universe itself is such a state. The deity formed a rational model of an ideal living creature and materially generated it. That living organism is the universe. The details of this story are Timaeus’ account of its creation. The story is a *μῦθος*, which Timaeus describes as a kind of “bastard reasoning” where you can give a probable account of something like the space of the universe that sort of exists, but not really. Timaeus’ description of creation, like its counterpart in Genesis, is a, but not *merely* a, *story*.

The term “myth” has been employed throughout this book in the way that Plato used it in the *Timaeus*. It is the method of

expression appropriate to what exactly is vague and precisely is uncertain. In this context, if both the Genesis account of creation and the *Timaeus* within the context of the other literature of their times are read as movements away from the major role of myth in scientific explanations, the midrash¹ clearly reversed this trend. However, this reversal in direction was only temporary. While subsequent accounts of creation became increasingly elaborate, the role of mythology in them decreased significantly. Still, the medieval Jewish philosophers also told stories about creation rather than gave scientific explanations. Like the author(s) of scripture and Plato, they used the language of art to say that the morality play of creation is more a product of divine will/desire/intention than a chance happening of necessity, where morality and the law have primacy over any other possible kind of value. However, Rosenzweig's new thought of creation explicitly utilized Plato's use in the *Timaeus* of myth. For Rosenzweig, it was the appropriate way to discuss something that on one hand is not something but on the other hand is not nothing at all.

Given the limitations of human language, any theory of creation must be, as it always has been, a myth, viz., a story that pictures all that is in general, that is informed, however inadequately, by everything that we know in particular. It is a mode of thinking as appropriate to the contemporary period as it was to the worlds of the Hebrew scriptures and the classical rabbis.

THE RELEVANCE OF SCIENTIFIC MODELS OF CREATION

The starting point for determining Jewish (or Christian) dogma is the inherited text(s) of the Bible. In general, no biblical text (including those relevant to creation) is so specific that it can determine, by itself, any doctrine. However, the biblical text is not so vague that it can mean anything. On the contrary, an honest reading of the text will limit the range of possible interpretations. In other words, while the Torah sets limits on interpretation, it does not determine the belief. Rather, within its boundaries, total freedom is given to specu-

Cambridge University Press

0521452147 - Judaism and the Doctrine of Creation

Norbert M. Samuelson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

lation. In fact such speculation is itself a duty of the law. With specific reference to the biblical doctrine of creation, we will see that the boundaries are that there exists something that is nothing, out of which God, through an act of will, creates, throughout eternity, a universe that, in virtue of his intention, has meaning and moral value. However, this is only a general outline of what a belief in creation would look like. It is no more specific about creation than the imperative, "You shall not steal" is specific about laws of private property. To determine in detail which specific possible cosmogony and cosmology within the parameters of the biblical text is true is in itself as much a positive religious duty as it is to legislate concrete civil laws within a state. As in the case of Jewish law we must turn empirically to the data of legal case precedence, so in the case of Jewish philosophy we must turn to the results of empirical studies in science.

Prima facie Rosenzweig's writings present a strong (if not the strongest) argument against my claimed dependence of a belief about creation on scientific studies. He argued that the source of theology's content claims about the origin and general nature of the universe should be revelation. His understanding of the theology that transcends philosophy was in form at least a return to midrash. Nachmanides divided the forms of biblical commentary into four kinds – homiletic or midrashic, linguistic or grammatical, philosophical, and mystical. Rosenzweig had rejected both the philosophical and mystical medieval ways of interpreting holy texts in favor of what he called "grammatical analysis," by which he meant linguistic/grammatical commentary. However, it would be better characterized as a union of both homiletic and grammatical analysis.

In response I want to claim that Rosenzweig's position is a result of the radical separation he made between logic and language, and that separation has no justification either in Rosenzweig's arguments or in fact. While he recognized that thinking about reality would require a language that could encompass depth, i.e., a set of signs that could express more than two dimensions, he mistakenly inferred that such thought

must transcend reason and concluded that theology, from the perspective of mathematical thinking, must be a “mystery.” However, merely to think multidimensionally in terms of algebra in no sense is mysterious. Rosenzweig drew lines where no separation is called for. In fact the mathematical symbolism of modern physics is more than adequate to picture Rosenzweig’s demands for depth.

Our primary source for informed opinions about the origin and nature of the universe are the models developed in particle physics and astrophysics. Yet, to understand them presupposes a level of mathematical sophistication far beyond that presupposed even by the *Timaeus*. At the same time, it is not the case that the mathematics alone can present an adequate tale of creation. The mathematics employed by the physicists are a pure formalism whose interpretation is left for philosophers and theologians. This task can be understood as a kind of (fairly sophisticated) modern midrash. In other words, the consequence of rejecting Rosenzweig’s radical separation between science and religion does not diminish the value of studying the Hebrew scriptures and midrash; rather, it increases the value of philosophical commentaries on the biblical text for determining religious dogma.

LIBERAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

That my work in philosophy is “Jewish” means that it is not “Christian,” “Muslim,” “Buddhist,” etc., but it does not mean that it is not “general.” The use of religious adjectives to modify the noun “philosophy” both clarifies my sources and places the study within the general category of philosophy of religion. However, there are no such things as religious truths any more than there are philosophical, sociological, scientific, etc. kinds of truths. The adjective specifies the discipline but not any special kind of truth. (I am not an Averroïst.) At the same time I do not believe there is some kind of generic brand of philosophy of religion that can simply be called “philosophy of religion.” When people in Western civilization say they are doing “philosophy of religion” without the qualification of a

specific religious tradition, what most likely they are doing is “Christian philosophy,” and in their naivete they are unaware that what they have to say is specifically Christian.

There is a difference between what I have called “factual” and “moral” truths. The former are truths about what was, is and will be the case; the latter are truths about what ought to be the case. However, the meaning of the term “truth” is the same in both cases. What is different are the cases to which these values apply and the rules of evidence for making these judgments. However, this has nothing to do with a distinction between what kinds of claims fall within the respective domains of science and religion.

The most apparent implication of the above paragraph is my operative assumption that reasoning necessarily is contextual. Whatever anyone says is inescapably tied to being a certain person with a specific background bound by both time and place. However, contextual does not mean subjective. The use of reason on this or any topic is intended to determine truth, and truth is not contextual. There is a critical difference between the truth status of a claim and the grounds for making a claim. The claim itself, to the extent that it is clear, is either true or false. However, context inescapably affects the status of the evidence. We reason because we have no more reliable way to judge truth. At the same time we need to recognize that we can never be sure that what we reason to be true ultimately is true. Our reasoning inescapably is limited by our ignorance – ignorance of unimagined relevant facts, hidden assumptions, hidden ambiguities, and hidden alternative ways of formulating our question. These unavoidable limitations mean that all conclusions remain tentative. The best arguments are only that, viz., the most reasonable case possible at this time and place. Certainty necessarily is not attainable.

It might be claimed that what it means to say that all reasoning is contextual is that it is determined by adopting certain premises. This interpretation is not incorrect, but it is misleading. Obviously, inferences in a valid argument follow from the premises. However, the model of forming syllogisms is not the only model for reasoning. In fact, it may be the least

applicable one to the questions that most interest Jewish philosophers.² On the other hand, if you mean to say that all human reasoning is unavoidably limited by all kinds of ignorance, both of facts and of alternative perspectives, then the answer is yes. Clearly how you ask a question affects your answers.

Clearly different contexts do affect truth judgments. For example, as Spinoza argued, while in general democracy would be a preferable system of government to monarchy, there may be cases where monarchy is preferable. However, all this means is that the context in which a claim is made is itself part of the claim. It does not in any way relativize the truth claim. In a context in which democracy is wrong it is absolutely wrong; in another context it would be absolutely right. A clear distinction has to be made between how you *judge* what is/ought-to-be the case and what is/ought-to-be the case.

It might be objected that by my own admission any answer to questions about creation can have only the status of an opinion as opposed to knowledge. The objection is valid if the terms “opinion” and “knowledge” are used as they functioned in medieval philosophy, where only informative claims that are necessarily true and are recognized as such fall within the domain of knowledge while all other informative claims fall within the domain of opinion. In this context I see no problem in saying that my judgments about creation at best will be opinion. However, they will not be *merely* opinion. In the medieval sense of the term, there simply does not seem to be anything that can qualify for membership in the class of knowledge. Now, given that the term so defined names an empty class whereas in ordinary usage a great many claims seem to qualify for membership, we ought to draw the conclusion that something is wrong with this definition. In fact we can differentiate the members of the class of opinions into relative grades of more and less likely views, and I would apply the term “knowledge” to the more certain members of the class. It is in this sense that I claim that my interest is in knowledge.

The recognition of these limitations is the ultimate basis for preferring historical to mathematical philosophy. The value of the former over the latter approach is that in examining what

other philosophers from other ages and civilizations have said about our concern we have the best chance to minimize the role of ignorance in our reasoning. However, this is in no way to say that all judgments are equally valid. Our truth judgments ultimately depend on reasoning not because reasoning is infallible but because every other known alternative is more fallible. Furthermore, it is legitimate to say that some judgments are more reasonable than others even though it is possible that a less reasonable judgment may in fact be true. That what is less reasonable may be true is not a license for irrationality. The point is that a reasonable judgment is more likely to be true than a less reasonable one, and that is sufficient grounds for basing judgments on reason.

The price that must be paid for granting these grounds is that the term “knowledge” cannot intelligibly be restricted to claims that are certain. Rather, what it means to say that we know something is that that something is the more reasonable, conceivable alternative, and for that reason it is more likely to be true than any of the recognized alternatives. In other words, truth is a value that ranges over probability functions. To say that p is true and q is false means that p has more probability than q . In other words, all that it can ever mean to say that something is true is that it probably is the case, and there are objective standards to measure probability.

If my philosophy is qualified by the adjective “Jewish,” my Jewish philosophy is qualified by the adjective “liberal.” Let me explain what I mean by these terms with the following example: At the first meeting of the Academy for Jewish Philosophy in 1980 considerable time was spent discussing the importance of analyzing classical Jewish texts. I recall one particular discussion between David Bleich and me about the value of reading Gersonides. Both of us agreed that wherever relevant, as certainly is the case in talking about creation, Gersonides is to be consulted not merely because he is Jewish but because in a strictly technical sense he reflects rabbinic philosophy at its best. The fact that Bleich is a traditional Jew and I am liberal made no difference. In general, there ought to

be no difference between how a liberal and a traditional Jew will do Jewish philosophy. Both will read the relevant classics of rabbinic tradition with as much care and skill as possible in order to determine what they have to say.

Bleich also said that once he had determined what Gersonides said on a question like creation or divine providence, the issue of truth was settled precisely because Gersonides is the best source in the rabbinic tradition for these questions. It is at this point that the difference between a liberal and a traditional Jew becomes significant. For me the view of Gersonides or any other rabbi is simply that, their judgment. It is a view to be treated with utmost seriousness, but it does not settle the question. In general, both a liberal and a traditional Jew as Jews will consult the voice(s) of rabbinic tradition. That examination is what makes their study Jewish. However, in the end their motives for doing the same thing are quite different. For a traditional Jew the investigation in itself is sufficient to settle truth. For a liberal Jew the reading of traditional texts is only a first step. It answers the question: What is (are) the view(s) of the tradition? To answer that question is a critical part of answering the further question: What is true? But the two questions are not the same. The most fundamental difference between a traditional and a liberal Jew is that the judgment, “This is what the tradition teaches” does not mean “This is true.”

The obvious question is, if the tradition does not determine truth, then why consult the tradition at all. In the discussions between Jewish philosophers and contemporary astrophysicists on the origin of the universe at the 1984 meeting of the Academy, this was the most critical question that the astrophysicists posed.

No one denied that many of the statements by rabbis like Maimonides and Gersonides about the cosmos are false. For example, all of the medieval Jewish astronomers believed that there is a sphere of stars that are not subject to generation and corruption, while all of us know, without any reasonable doubt, that these stars are as subject to birth, growth, decline and death as are the material inhabitants of the planet earth.