20th Century Jewish Thought and Classical American Pragmatism: New Perspectives on Hayyim Hirschensohn, Mordecai M. Kaplan and Eliezer Berkovits

Thesis for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

By

Nadav Berman Shifman

Submitted to the Senate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

March 2018 (approved September 2018)

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Prof. Avinoam Rosenak

Abstract

This work examines the philosophical links between three twentieth century Jewish American Rabbis-thinkers, Hayyim Hirschensohn, Mordecai M. Kaplan and Eliezer Berkovits, and their connection to Classical American Pragmatism (hereafter: *CAP*). While each of the 'fathers of American Pragmatism' (Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, hereafter CAPs) had his own philosophical interests and emphasis, three core-ideas are discerned as their philosophical common denominator: Rejection of *Cartesian Radical Foundationalism and Skepticism* (hereafter: *CRFS*), *Fallibilism* and the *Pragmatic Maxim* (hereafter: *PM*). Anti-foundationalism is the claim that an absolute metaphysical certainty is *not* a necessary condition for a philosophical reasoning or normative system, however, moderate foundations are indeed required. The rejection of Cartesian skepticism is the assertion that doubt is a useful philosophical tool, as long as it is referring to a real or practical doubt, differently from a theoretical-hypothetical one, or the Cartesian methodological doubt casting. *Fallibilism* is the idea that knowledge is being processed by humans and is constantly corrected considering new evidence and mistakes; *Pragmatic Maxim* is the claim that the truth-value or the meaning of metaphysical and religious issues is judged and understood considering their worldly functioning.

Chapter 1 presents the philosophical sources of *CAP* in Western thought, and clarifies the similarities and the differences between *CAP* and its immediate philosophical neighbors in modernity. A significant clarification is made about the metaphysical and religious commitments that the *CAP*s had (each one in his own special way, of course). This extended naturalistic orientation accounts for the inherent gap between *CAP*s' pragmatism and anti-metaphysical philosophies like that of Marx, Nietzsche, and logical positivism (e.g., Carnap), and between *CAP* and some post-modern philosophers, the most dominant of whom is Richard Rorty. **Chapter 2** portrays the intellectual pragmatic world of Peirce, James and Dewey, and unpacks their *weltanschauung*s. Special emphasis is devoted to their holistically-ethical, socially-integrative, democratic and pluralistic worldviews. In **chapter 3**, the three core-concepts of *CAP* (Rejection of *CRFS*, Fallibilism, and the *PM*), are thoroughly defined and briefly demonstrated in the writings of the *CAP*s.

These core-concepts are the basis for the second part of the dissertation, namely the systematic analysis of three Jewish thinkers: Rabbi Ḥayyim Hirschensohn ([RHH] Z'fat 1857 – New-Jersey 1935), Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan (Lithuania 1881 – New York 1983) and Rabbi Prof. Eliezer Berkovits (Romania 1908 – Israel 1992). Each one of them lived in the United States for many years and knew *CAP*. This research provides an analysis of their Jewish-particular thought and halakhah, from the perspective of *CAP*. After a presentation of the challenges that American intellectual life posed to Jewish thinkers in the 20th century, I turn to examine the thought of Hirschensohn, Kaplan, and Berkovits. The main findings are as follows:

The pragmatic rejection of *CRFS* is reflected in **Hayyim Hirschensohn**'s thought (as analyzed in **chapter 4**) in general, in several cases. My analysis to RHH's thought is briefly demonstrating the pragmatic infrastructure in Jewish tradition, which was a fertile ground for RHH's pragmatic thought (as well as to that of Kaplan and Berkovits). Hirschensohn did not argue against *any* foundationality as such, and advocated the need for systematicity and coherence, as far as possible. RHH considered local doubts, as opposed to hyperbolic doubt, to be an indispensable philosophical tool. His rejection of radical foundationalism and skepticism expressed in his willingness to suspend the belief of the immortality of the soul, in favor of halakhic legitimacy of performing autopsies, for example. Fallibilism is reflected in Hirschensohn in his understanding of Biblical covenant (*brit*) as a constantly renewed phenomenon and in is his concept of oral-law, e.g. in the objection to halakhic codification. *PM* is manifested in Hirschensohn's halakhic thought in his emphasis on the purposiveness and intelligibility of Divine law, and at the same time, in stressing the role of human halakhic interpretation of it.

In **Mordecai Kaplan**'s thought (as examined in **chapter 5**), the pragmatic rejection of *CRFS* is reflected in his idea of 'Judaism as Civilization', encompassing nationality, religion, land, language, etc. This, in contrast to some radical-foundationalist attempts to base Judaism on a single element. Kaplan's rejection of *CRFS* is further manifested in the negation of Cartesian methodological doubt, in the insistence on seeing belief in God as an immanently human intuition, as well as in other cases. Fallibilism is reflected in Kaplan's notion of *Folkways*, based on the phenomenon of constantly changing Jewish norms and surrounding environment. *PM* is manifested in his concept

of *functional interpretation*, or the understanding of traditional metaphysical content, according to its worldly ethical consequences. However, the critical discussion implies that in some issues, Kaplan's functionalism and ontological naturalism may have failed to be pragmatic, as he intended. This, although there is a basis in Jewish tradition for some of his controversial interpretive maneuvers. Finally, I emphasize Kaplan's actual and potential contribution to contemporary Jewish renewal movements.

The pragmatic rejection of *CRFS* is reflected in **Eliezer Berkovits**' thought (as examined in **chapter 6**) in his critique of halakhic fundamentalism, and in his dialogical theology (or 'encounter theology', as I call it), which explicitly rejects the Cartesian requirement of proving God's existence, as well as his philosophic world-picture alike. Fallibilism is reflected in Berkovits in his understanding of halakhic method for applying God's will in an ever-changing world. Human reasoning (*svara*) has a central role in carrying out Divine will. *PM* is manifested in Berkovits' halakhic conceptualization of halakhah as consisting of several holistically-entangled purposive considerations: 'the possible' or the feasible, the ethical, the economical sustainable, and the spiritually-meaningful. Berkovits' pragmatism is further reflected in his insistence on the indispensability of each of these aspects. Finally, I raise some questions and observations regarding Berkovits' halakhic thought and its traditional sources, within the broader context of tradition and change.

In the **conclusion**, I make some more general observations about Hirschensohn, Kaplan and Berkovits, as pragmatic thinkers. I present Isaiah Berlin's distinction between 'Fox' and 'Hedgehog' philosophers, and argue that this model fails to capture – and hence excludes – the singularity of pragmatic thinkers like Hirschensohn, Kaplan and Berkovits, who try to address the pluralistic and the monistic elements of reality, in a holistic way. Their halakhic commitments, I argue, makes it more explicit than in the case of the *CAP*s.

Some broader contributions of this research, are the following. From the perspective of the history of ideas, I refer to James' assessment that Pragmatism is *a new name for some old ways of thinking*. However, the *CAP*s did not take Jewish thought into account in this context. Following Harry Wolfson, Peter Ochs and others, I argue that Pragmatism (or *CAP*) may be perceived as a 'new name for some old *Jewish* ways of thinking' (this does not imply that such pragmatic inclinations are the *only* ways that appear in Jewish tradition). It is perhaps the basic mutual *resemblance* between the

pragmatism in halakhic Judaism and pragmatic-fallible side of modernity, I suggest, which caused a halakhic stringent reaction of undermining of the role of pragmatism and fallibility, resulting in an implicit ultra-orthodox turn to Cartesian radical-foundationalist side of modernity).

A significant contribution of this work is portraying introductory lines of a pragmatic Halakhic decision making and discerning some of its metaphysical commitments, and in establishing the Descartes vs. *CAP* as a paradigmatic axis or reference for understanding Jewish thought in modern times. Beyond analyzing inner-halakhic concepts (such as *brit* or halakhic-purposiveness), this work stresses the importance of metaphysical commitments for pragmatic halakhah, and hence a tension (even contradiction) between pragmatic theologies, and the 'hostile-God' (or un-ethical God) theologies.

Finally, a general humane contribution of this research, is in re-emphasizing pragmatism (and more specifically, *CPA* and *CAP*s) as a humane deliberative way of thinking, an idea which is not for granted, facing contemporary religious fundamentalism, political rudeness, and evolutionist post-humanism (all of them are characterized by what I term "pragmatism in the *wide* sense", but unlike *CAP*, not in the narrow sense). More widely, the possibility of reconstructing a humane pragmatic discourse, is an alternative to the dominant idea of implying that contingency and incommensurability make every interhuman discursive attempt to be perceived as baseless and worthless.

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