YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

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In memory of Amos Dubrawsky (Amos ben Chagai HaLevi and Nechama Pearl) zt"l -
brother, son and friend. May his neshama have an aliyah.

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**Shiur # 06:**

**The Conditions for Moral Accountability**

As we have seen, in his view of morality, as distinct from the fundamental perceptions of morality proposed by other philosophers, Manitou emphasizes an aspect that sounds fairly simple and straightforward: acknowledgment of the other. The measure of morality is one's attitude towards other people in real situations.

Another point of contention between Manitou and the Kantian approach concerns the source of morality: Kant maintains that morality is autonomous, while according to Manitou it is heteronomous. In other words, Manitou explains that morality comes not from within man themselves, but rather from a source outside of them. He explains that this defines Judaism: there are commandments and values whose source is Divine, and which obligate man.

**Innate or external morality?**

However, elsewhere Manitou seems to propose the opposite view:

According to the Torah, from the moment that a soul is breathed into Adam's body, he is endowed with moral awareness. Concerning the verse, “And the Lord God said: Behold, man has become like one of us (*ke-achad mimenu*), knowing good and evil; and now, lest he reach forth his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" (*Bereishit* 3:22), Rashi asks: "What is man's uniqueness? Knowing good and evil, which is not the case among animals and beasts." Rashi interprets the word "*achad*" in the sense of "unique". Man is unique amongst all of Creation in that he has a moral consciousness, [so that the verse means] “man has become unique, to know good and evil from it” – i.e., having the ability to make that distinction. A command or prohibition has no meaning for someone who has no moral consciousness. Therefore it is important to emphasize that the moral consciousness existed in Adam from the moment that he was given a soul. Only then could he be commanded (ibid. 2:16-17): "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat. But from the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’" *(Sod Midrash Ha-toladot* III, p. 193)

This tells us that morality is imbedded in man himself, and that this is in fact what sets man apart from all other creatures: man is born with a moral consciousness. It would seem, then, that morality is indeed autonomous. Elsewhere Manitou writes that the point of generosity is that it comes from within, rather than as obedience to an external law. This, he says, is what differentiates the concept of morality from that of ethics. Hence, it is not such a simple matter to place Manitou in the camp that is opposed to Kant and to assert that his view of morality is that it is heteronomous.

Below we shall clarify where Manitou actually stands, at the same time addressing a broader question that will serve to highlight the source of morality: What infrastructure must exist in man so that moral demands can be made of them? The identification of this infrastructure, which is man's dimension of autonomy, will help us to resolve the seeming contradiction and to clarify and define the autonomous element and the heteronomous element of morality. Manitou analyzes the question by referring to the Rambam in two places: in his *Commentary on the Mishna* (Introduction to Tractate *Avot,* Chapter 8) and in his *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Teshuva,* Chapter 5*).* We shall review the conclusions he draws from this analysis.

**Foundations of the moral act**

Four elements are necessary before man can be held morally accountable for their actions:

1. The fundamental moral awareness that goodness is positive and worthy, and evil is detestable;
2. The knowledge of what is good and what is evil;
3. The desire to do good; and
4. Freedom of choice between good and evil (in other words, the freedom to choose, without compulsion).

Element 1, the most basic requirement before any moral demand can be made, is that a person must possess knowledge that there is good and evil. Manitou asserts that good and evil are fundamental human concepts; specifically, man is aware that goodness is worthy while evil is to be rejected. Animals do not agonize over moral questions, because they lack any consciousness of the moral concepts of good and evil.

Manitou explains that this consciousness is found in man autonomously. Man is created from the outset as a creature with a moral consciousness, and their response to morality is a response to the moral awareness that is within them (as opposed to Kant, for whom man’s moral action is obedience to duty). This consciousness must precede a person’s decision as to what is considered good and what is considered evil.

Element 2 is the knowledge of what is good and what is evil. Here the picture is reversed: the details of the knowledge of what is good and evil is known to us from the Torah. Thus, the substance and details of Jewish morality are heteronomous (while according to Kant, the substance of morality is autonomous; man arrives at what is moral using his own reason.) A Jew does not determine their own values. According to the Torah, there is a supernal system of values that determines what is good and what is evil. Through its commandments and evaluations, the Torah defines the Jewish people’s heteronomous system of values, according to which they may know what is good and what is evil.

The philosophical view that a person arrives autonomously at his values, leads to the problem of moral relativism:

This view is unique to the Torah of Israel. The greatest philosophers struggled to find a rational source for the moral imperative, because their point of departure was that it is man who defines his values. They hold that values are autonomous, not heteronomous, and therefore they have trouble determining whether it is possible to define any values at all as absolute. (ibid., p. 191)

At the same time, even according to the Jewish view, there is a basic level of this knowledge that is embedded in man himself, even without him learning Torah. The Rambam, in *Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Melakhim* 8:11), discussing the Seven Noahide Laws, raises the possibility that Noach’s descendants would observe the commandments pertaining to them — not by virtue of the Divine command, but rather as persuaded by their own reason. Thus, there are commandments that man can arrive at solely through their reason (paralleling the Seven Noahide Laws) and the Jewish people would act in accordance with these even if they had not received the Torah. God implanted within man the tools to arrive at a basic level of morality on their own. However, in order for the Jewish people to know all the commandments, including those that human reason cannot arrive at on its own, they needed to receive the Torah.

We might therefore summarize thus far and say that according to Kant, moral action proceeds from obedience to a duty that has its source outside of man, while according to the Torah such action emerges from an inner will, while its content is determined by the supreme duty imposed from outside, by God.

Manitou identifies two potential problems relating to Kant's approach. The first is the subjectivization or relativization of morality: there are no absolute external values that obligate man. This is the first point of contention which we discussed: the question of whether the source of our knowledge of what is good and what is evil is autonomous or heteronomous. The second potential problem is moral action that is not performed willingly: a person obeys the moral imperative rather than acting out of their own inner positive will.

These problems give rise to the possibility of an evil, barbaric person who decides arbitrarily what is right and good — and then, since their conduct is guided by their own inner sense of right and wrong, they will blindly follow the perverted rules that they have made for themselves. An extreme example, as mentioned in the previous *shiur*, is Nazism.

Element 3 concerns man's most basic moral will: to be good, and not to be evil. God sets down a system of values in the Torah, and the question is whether man will follow them; above all, the question is whether they wish to be good. To be moral means, first and foremost, wanting to be good. This is entirely dependent on the person themselves. Their moral will does not come from somewhere outside of them; it is completely autonomous.

The moral will is not manifest in its entirety all at once. A person experiences moral conflicts. Often, the moral act is not the first course of action that comes to their mind — but they know that it is the right thing to do and therefore act accordingly.

At first, there is a gap between what morality demands and their own personal wishes. At this stage, the basic will to be good is present within them, but in certain situations, with regard to some specific moral demands, it is difficult for them to act in accordance with it. Here we encounter the moral victory: the person understands that they are faced with a moral demand, and therefore they do what they should, even though it goes against their personal interest. As a person ages and works on themselves, they are expected to achieve higher levels of moral awareness, to the point where every moral demand becomes part of their own will. They aspire to progress from the level of *tzaddik* to that of *chasid* — i.e., from acting as they should because they should, even though it may be difficult and require that they overcome inner resistance (*tzaddik*), to acting as they should out of full identification with the moral imperative, out of their own inner will. Since this level is far more difficult to attain, a person is judged first and foremost for their moral action, and only afterwards for the state of mind surrounding it.

Element 4 is freedom of choice. A person has to be free to follow the course of action of their choice, with no coercion or barrier one way or the other. The freedom of choice is the very foundation of the Torah; it is the precondition for commands and for reward and punishment, as the Rambam teaches in *Hilkhot Teshuva.*

Does a person also have free choice with regard to their worldview, or are they forced to accept the findings of their reason? In his introduction to Tractate *Avot,* the Rambam writes that this is a very deep question. His conclusion is that ultimately a person's free choice extends to their powers of reason, too, but he offers no explanation of how this is so. Manitou explains by pointing out that a certain thought is not always the sole and inescapable conclusion of reasoning, such that man is forced to accept it. Rather, it is often simply a matter of a person preferring to think that way rather than a different way. One's preference is freely chosen, and expresses their will. Thus, one's thoughts and conclusions are autonomous and a matter of choice, such that a person may be judged for them.

In conclusion: Human beings knows deep inside them that goodness is right and proper, and that evil is to be rejected. The Torah teaches them what is good; left to their own reason, they might act in a way that is evil, out of a mistaken impression that it is good. The most fundamental freedom granted to man is the major question of whether they wish to be good and to do good, and this depends on them alone. Finally, people have the practical freedom to do the good that they seek to do; there is nothing that forces them in advance towards a certain action.

In the next *shiur,* we will examine the Jewish view, and the view of human culture in general, towards freedom of choice.