

Radical Theology and Judaism

Response to Martin Kavka

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With a thoroughness characteristic of the author, Martin Kavka takes us back some forty years through forgotten byways of 1960s death-of-God talk. Kavka marks out the major and minor moments in the discourse in order to explore the possibility for today of creating a form of radical Jewish theology based on a kenotic theory of divine transcendence poured out into the earthly vessel of rabbinic *nomos* and human law. The philosophical vector is one established by Levinas and Hegel. But the entire project hinges upon the reading of passages culled from the Babylonian Talmud, which Kavka has interpreted with the kind of care that his friends and readers will recognize as uniquely his. I cannot help but wonder if law is ever radical.

Identified precisely by Kavka, “obscenity” was the keyword and critical affect with which Jewish thinkers like Richard Rubenstein and Eugene Borowitz responded to works of radical theology by Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton. Intrigued by the death-of-God movement as a sociological phenomenon, Jewish theologians writing in the mid- to late 1960s were unable to celebrate the “good news” of radical kenosis. Altizer’s apocalyptic affirmation of history as the affirmation of Auschwitz was too bitter a pill to be a serious Jewish option. Rubenstein, who could no longer abide by the transcendent God of

classical theism and conventional interpretations of traditional Judaism, saw in the immanent God of nature the God of Holy Nothingness. This pulled him deep into sheltering visions of *nomos* and place provided by the cyclic wisdom of ritual and the earthy drama of homecoming in Zionism.

In his essay, Kavka wants to push the relationship between Judaism and radical theology past the dead end represented by the problem of Auschwitz and the death of God in 1960s American theology. To do so, he places Levinasian alterity into conversation with the concept of law predicated upon the realization of human freedom advanced by Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right*. The upshot is to show that “the firm opposition between heaven and earth” is “only putative.”

But Kavka does not consider that to radically collapse this distinction is to court the very type of obscenity rejected by Jewish theologians in the 1960s. If what happens on earth is heaven, then heaven has been turned into hell. This is the logical consequence that I wager Altizer was always and is still willing to accept. Kavka notes that in Altizer’s thought apocalypse always gives way to genesis. I am not sure I know of any Jewish thinker who would seriously take that risk at the abyss of religious consciousness. Most Jewish philosophers and theologians, me and Kavka included, are too lily-livered.

With an eye on the rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud, the turn that Kavka takes is to root a Jewish form of radical theology in a kenotic concept of free law. But even the freest form of law can never be “radical.” The law promoted by Kavka is based on universal norms, conversation, pragmatism, transparency, and reconciliation. These are liberal values, not radical ones, which means that Jewish theology is liberal when it is not conservative. Even the very structure of Kavka’s essay indicates this. Kavka leaves behind the bracing obscenities of Altizer’s raw apocalyptic for the more irenic tones of Richard Rorty.

What I find missing in Kavka’s account of radical theology and Judaism is the failure to identify what makes radical thought radical. In the few pages I have here, I can only recommend that radical theology is based on immediacy. In contrast, the Jews of so-called normative Judaism and their modern and postmodern interpreters never stopped “believing” in mediation. The Babylonian rabbis cited by Kavka found God’s place within the structured

and structuring four ells of law. They did not look for God in more open, unprotected types of space. Even Rubenstein could not leave the synagogue for the secular city thematized most famously in Protestant theological circles by Harvey Cox, also writing in the 1960s. As for the rabbis, there is no kenosis in the sense intended by Kavka. Law is substituted for the Temple, which the Romans destroyed. In heaven, God continues to inhabit a place behind the partition (*pargod*), a place in the Heavenly Academy from which only the prophet Elijah can bring us reports.

What then is radical thought?

Kavka is on to something profound when he seeks to identify the rabbinic embrace of law as a form of Jewish kenosis. Even if it is not kenotic, law represents an element of immanence at work in Jewish religion. I would nevertheless submit that kenosis or immanence is a necessary but insufficient condition for radical theology and radical thought, especially as they came to be defined in the 1960s.

I would see constitutive of all forms of radical thought, including radical theology, a twofold relation to conventional forms of thought and representation. The first moment of radical thought is an intentional and fundamental negation or uprooting of the order of things. At this moment or level, Richard Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz* (1966) was indeed radical. Opposed to the God of history and the idea of Jewish election, Rubenstein tore up the roots of classical theism and Jewish identity as understood by the religious establishment of his time.

The second moment in radical thought constitutes a foundational affirmation of the destructive force that rips up conventional order, the vision of a world without structure. In *The Return of the Real* (1996), a book indebted to Lacan, art historian Hal Foster shows how avant-garde art tries to break the glass or tear up the screens that separate art from life. In pursuing this theme, I would point as well to Martin Jay, who traced in *Downcast Eyes* (1994) the violent rejection of visuality in twentieth-century French thought. One could include the image of blindness in writings by Derrida, the attempt to work past the limits of human representation in Deleuze and Irigaray, the negative approach to the synthetic imagination in Lacan and Žižek.

Following the thought of Slavoj Žižek along the broad trajectory of his writing, I will venture to say that radical thought is "monstrous," *essentially*

“obscene” and “violent.” This includes radical theology. There is something “inhuman” in radical thought, predisposed as it is to fundamental destruction and open to violence, even if the practical outcome is only rhetorical. Radical thought affirms the one single *topos*, value, or force before which every other single point, thought, value, or force is negated or extinguished. Dual substance yields to single substance in Spinoza, slave morality gives way to the vitalism of *Lebensphilosophie* with Nietzsche. The political trumps everything in Schmitt, as do the militant gesture and truth event in the philosophies of Žižek and Badiou. Structure gives way to apocalypse in Altizer’s theology.

Readers might want to quibble with this or that name, but I can only suggest in such a short response paper that Spinoza, Nietzsche, Schmitt, Altizer, Deleuze, Žižek, and Badiou are “monsters.” Radical thought is a monster. It eats its other, or its object. And let’s add Bataille, Lacan, and Althusser. Levinas too would be a monster because in his thought the other eats the self. In contrast, law creates its object by inhibiting or accommodating a subject. That is why law is never radical, no matter how free we might be to determine it.

Where then are the Jewish radicals, the Jewish monsters, the radical Jewish antinomians? Again, in such a short response paper I can only point. They would include the ancient Jewish apocalypics, what Walter Benjamin might have called “the divine violence” of Jesus prepared to tear out his eye or to abandon his family, the false messiahs Shabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Jacob Taubes in the twentieth century. In their negation of the world as it is, they take their place outside the structure of law, heteronymous and autonomous law alike. About this tradition, scholars such as Elliot Wolfson and Shaul Magid would have much more to say than either Kafka or I.

For now and in sum, I would only propose an alternative sketch to radical theology and to the hot or cold cosmic view. I find it in a question posed in Vasily Grossman’s great novel *Life and Fate*, published in 1960. Set in and around Stalingrad and Moscow at a pivotal moment during World War II, the novel takes as its basic structural opposition the one between aggregate and kindness. A wizened mentor figure addresses a central protagonist, Viktor Shtrum, who is preparing himself to be purged from his leadership position in an important physics laboratory and perhaps sent to the gulag for ideological reasons. Oblivious to Viktor’s situation, the older physicist begins to speculate

about the evolution of infinite human powers in an infinite universe, about the animation of inanimate matter, about the transformation of matter into energy, about the crossing of psychic matter over millions of light-years, about the making omnipresent of a human mind that will dwarf the very presence of God. But Viktor asks, “You say that life is freedom. Is that what people in the camps think? . . . What if [infinite human mind] transforms the whole world into a galactic concentration camp?” The upshot of the question is this: “What I want to know is—do you believe in the evolution of kindness, morality, mercy? Is man capable of evolving that way?”

Grossman’s novel is a huge thing. In its sweep of history and the history of ideology in the mid-twentieth century, Grossman takes into account the crushing character of aggregate and mass in physical energy and political ideology, in the interpersonal collisions at a time of political purges, and the explosive impact of high-velocity munitions, and other instantiations of the force of fate and chaos. From these, Grossman always returns to the small human things. These are the acts of kindness and the tough persistence of individual difference that would have no meaning in the combined speculative worlds of religious apocalypse, radical critical theory, or more recent turns to theoretical physics and neuroscience in so-called speculative realism. The radical theology that interests me takes its bearings in the radical thought of human kindness, but this to me is never radical.

About kindness, the rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud had this to say in tractate Sotah. One of the cruelest tractates of the rabbinic corpus of law, it deals with the rabbinic interpretation of the law that submits the suspected adulteress to a test of bitter waters. Much could be said about this tractate, about how the rabbis simultaneously seek to limit the terrible force of the biblical law even as they revel in the fantasy of violence directed against women. For now, I only note a long digression regarding the death of Moses. It is an exposition by one Rabbi Simlai about God and the Torah that caught my attention. Of the Torah, he claims: “Its beginning is kindness [*gemilut hasidim*] and its end is kindness. Its beginning is the performance of kindness, as it is written, ‘And God made for Adam and his wife skin garments, and He clothed them.’ And its end is kindness, as it is written, ‘He buried [Moses] in the depression’” (14a). In this exposition, a gentle anthropomorphism limits the power of God into the four eels of a moral gesture.

Is this a radical thought, a monster that eats its other? Probably not. In no way does it address the problem of catastrophic suffering and modern secularism that so moved Rubenstein and the death-of-God movement. It contains neither a profound negation of something awful nor an affirmation of something terrible. Elsewhere in the same tractate, a suffering people complains about a God who has become a stranger, and who acts as if in shock. When I wrote *(God) After Auschwitz* (1998) some fourteen years ago, I knew that “antitheodicy” was not alien to the rabbis. At the time, I had no idea just how prevalent this form of expression really is in the Babylonian Talmud. But maybe in the exposition of Rabbi Simlai, we do have a small radical thought, a little monster that consumes its other. In religion, I am pretty sure, nothing else matters. Apocalypse and other acts of extreme negation and affirmation are eaten up in the image of kindness with which the Torah is said by at least one rabbi to begin and to end.

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