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The Theme of Action in Mordecai Kaplan's Philosophy: Pragmatic Foundation and Role in the Reconstructionist Project

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Abstract: *Mordecai Kaplan is one of the most significant and valuable modern Jewish thinkers. Western scholars put him in a par with such famous and respected philosophers as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Hermann Cohen. Kaplan's philosophy became a theological basis of the Reconstructionist movement in Judaism, which attracts about 2%⁸ of American Jews. In his works Kaplan combines Jewish religious thought with the ideas of American pragmatists, process theologians, Spinoza and*

⁸*Ament J.* American Jewish Religious Denominations // United Jewish Communities Report Series on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01. Report 10, February 2005.

Bergson. Although the variety of the intellectual links between Kaplan's philosophy and other famous philosophical teachings is really great, the influence of Pragmatism seems to be crucial. This paper studies Kaplan's ideas in the aspect of rationality and action, which is the cornerstone of his thought and, presumably, the best example showing his strong ties with American Pragmatism.

Key words: *Mordecai Kaplan, Reconstructionist Judaism, Pragmatism, Theory of Action*

Introduction Two main books, dedicated to the philosophy of Mordecai Kaplan are «The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan» and «The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan». It seems that the very names clearly show us the real character of Kaplan's thought. On one hand, they tell us about the strong connection between Kaplan's teaching and American cultural and philosophical context, on the other — about its revolutionary and even provocative manner. Kaplan's view on such fundamental problems as the essence of religion, the nature of God and the criteria of religious truth has nothing in common with traditional Judaism. At the same time, this non-dogmatic, original and critical character of Kaplan's philosophy makes it more interesting and valuable for a philosopher. Since Kaplan shares a lot with Pierce, James and Dewey it makes the case even more thrilling (in fact it's difficult to imagine something further from traditional Judaism than American pragmatism). In this paper I study Kaplan's approach to the concept of action — the aspect, where he is as close to Pragmatism, as he is far from traditional Jewish thought. I state that philosophy of Mordecai Kaplan can be considered as Jewish religious pragmatism.

Kaplanian view of religion The most important statement which shows the very essence of Kaplanian approach to metaphysics is made by him in the book «The Purpose

and Meaning of Jewish existence»: «Whether justly or arbitrarily, the only way the term "existence" can express a communicable fact is to use it in the sense of "functioning". For anything to exist, it has to function in some specific manner. Whatever performs a function of any kind exists»⁹. Then he gives an interesting illustration concerned with the existence and non-existence of army. Kaplan states that army exists when it can function as an army and protect the country from its enemies. At the same time, we say that army is destroyed when it can no longer operate in such a way. It doesn't mean in fact that army is totally destroyed and there is no a single soldier alive and a single weapon ready to shoot. It means that officers, soldiers as well as their weapons and guns can no longer produce special actions and bring special results. With the help of this example, Kaplan shows that any object gets its existence, meaning and sense when it has a specific function. At the same time, we can identify the function of an object by analyzing the actions that it provides.

Kaplanian view on the essence of religion is fully based on the thesis we mentioned above. In his books Kaplan gives a number of definitions of religion, which are in fact very alike. The idea that all of them share is, according to Mordecai Kaplan, «a Copernican revolution of what should be central in an authentic perspective of human existence»¹⁰. For him «centrality should be accorded to the belief in, or the idea of salvation or human fulfillment»¹¹. In order to un-

⁹*Kaplan, M.* The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence. The Jewish Publication Society of America. Philadelphia, 1971. P. 3

¹⁰*Kaplan, M.* Between Two Worlds // Varieties of Jewish Belief, ed. I. Eisenstein. New York, 1966. PP. 140f.

¹¹*Kaplan, M.* Between Two Worlds // Varieties of Jewish Belief, ed. I. Eisenstein. New York, 1966. PP. 140f.

derstand what Kaplan means by salvation we should mention one more quote: «...the main function of religion has ever been to enable the group so to adjust itself to the environment as to make the most of its life. In the course of this adjustment there developed spiritual values, ideas, and beliefs by means of which it was able to overcome all dangers and to utilize to the best advantage whatever opportunities of growth the environment offered it». To sum up, we should say, that religion for Kaplan is nothing more than a sum of means (or instruments) for human salvation which he understands as spiritual, intellectual, moral and social progress of the mankind. Religious beliefs, traditions, and rituals provide this progress by making human consciousness and conduct better. For Kaplan, the function (and as we saw above — the essence) of religion is to bring such consequences.

It is important to note, that he uses this method in order to evaluate not only ritual but also a theoretical side of religion. Kaplanian understanding of beliefs is very close to the position of Charles Peirce. According to Peirce, every belief produces action (or a sum of actions), and we understand this belief clearly only when we study the actions caused by it (1. «Our beliefs guide our desires and shape our action»; «The feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions»¹²; 2. «...the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action»; «To develop its meaning, we have, therefore, simply to determine what habits it produces, for what a thing means is simply what habits

¹²*Peirce, C. S.* The fixation of belief // *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, New York, 1955. P. 9-10.

it involves»¹³). The idea of Kaplan is practically the same — every religious belief even if doesn't prescribe any specific action somehow changes our conduct (sometimes it causes some actions directly, but sometimes long chains might occur — beliefs cause actions that cause other actions and so on). The best quote showing Kaplan's perspective on the ties between thought and action is the following: «There can be no experience without ideas, nor ideas without experience. Since experience implies either acting or being acted upon, all thought is thought of, for, or about, action of some kind. Since all action is changed from one state of being to another, the thought that is related to action is the element of continuity in change»¹⁴. If changes in our lives initiated by religious beliefs lead us to salvation, it means that religion is true and authentic. We should state here that such approach is absolutely not typical for traditional Judaism. In Jewish religion, any belief may be identified as worth and true one only because it is understood as given by God. Practical results of the belief have never been in the focus of Jewish theological discourse. A good example would be Kashrus (Jewish dietary laws): it is already scientifically proved that this diet itself positively influence the process of digestion, but rabbis always warn Jewish people to follow them not in order to eat healthy, but only because abidance by these rules is an obligation of Jewish people. Kaplanian understanding of truth is again much closer to pragmatism than to classical Jewish theology. He says that whether beliefs and

¹³*Peirce, C. S.* How to make our thoughts clear // *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Indiana University Press, 1998. P. 131

¹⁴*Kaplan, M.* *The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence*. The Jewish Publication Society of America. Philadelphia, 1971. P. 193-194

actions bring salvation or not (and it is what make them true), fully depend on the circumstances. Social, cultural and intellectual context form the special framework for religion and life. In the earlier framework, for example, the idea of chosenness of Jewish people was absolutely adequate and caused positive consequences. Today, according to Kaplan, it can be totally harmful and must be reinterpreted and changed in order to cause the same actions and results which took place in past. All these examples embody one key idea of Kaplan — if we want to keep religion true and authentic we have to keep its function, and not the contents. And if we seek to keep the function, we have to change the contents.

The rational purpose of religion Pierce called the human actions caused by belief (in the article «What Pragmatism is?» he uses term «proposition») the rational purport of belief («Let the proposition be a general conditional proposition as to the future, and it is general such as is calculated really to influence human conduct; and such the pragmatist holds to be the rational purport of every concept»¹⁵). William James also stated that the most important «stage» of religion (and its goal) is not its scriptural and ritual body, but the changes in human life caused by them: «Philosophies and denials of philosophy, religions and atheisms, skepticisms and mysticisms, confirmed emotional moods and habitual practical biases, jostle one another; for all alike trials, hasty, prolix, or of seemly length, to answer this momentous question. And the function of them all, long or short, that which the moods and the systems alike sub-serve and pass into, is the third stage, — the stage of action. For

¹⁵*Peirce, C. S.* What pragmatism is? // *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings.* Indiana University Press, 1998. P. 343

no one of them itself is final»¹⁶. Kaplan was the first thinker, who stated that Judaism also has a rational purpose which is expressed in actions initiated by religious beliefs. Such actions are help, support, acts of respect, love and responsibility. If religious beliefs and traditions make a person behave in such a way, it means that they lead to individual and collective salvation. Kaplan notes that our task is to see a rational goal in any element of religion. Only this understanding can make religion vital and meaningful nowadays. When we keep some element without any changes, we do it not because of respect to tradition, but because we see its rational purpose adequate for today. For example, some prayers still bring spiritual inspiration to the people, motivate them for good deeds and stimulate communal connections. When we take into account such consequences it's fair to judge that this complex of beliefs and actions functions well and doesn't need to be changed. This rational procedure, which identifies the rational purpose of religious belief or tradition and values it from the standpoint of salvation, is absolutely unique for Judaism. Kaplan calls his approach «the functional method of interpretation», which he describes in his major work «Judaism as a civilization» and then uses throughout his entire life. Even the Torah is understood by him functionally — as an instrument of self-control and an instruction for the better life. If today we find there something that can't be used in such a way, we should read certain passages in a different way and find out a new meaning in them. At the same time, there is something that we don't find in the Torah, but what *could* be its part because it is functioning as an instrument of self-control and thus may be

¹⁶*James, William*. Reflex action and theism // The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy. Cosimo inc. New York, 2006. P. 123

regarded as belonging to the Torah. According to Kaplan, in such a way the functional essence of the Torah will be kept. Again we see that actual attitude to the religion comes as a result of the logical or rational operation.

Religion and its environment As it was mentioned earlier, Kaplan supposes that religious views of people depend on their worldview. The problem comes out when there is serious disharmony between religion and our knowledge of the Universe. It happened many times in the history of Judaism and, according to Kaplan, many Jewish thinkers (The Sages of Talmud, Maimonides, Philo of Alexandria) successfully reinterpreted Jewish religion in order to adopt it to the actual intellectual climate. Kaplan states that Jewish religion is in unprecedented danger in the XX century, because it still exists in «supernatural» framework, while modern human conciseness has already shifted to the «natural» one. It means that, according to Kaplan, modern people can't accept the idea of the other reality — absolute and transcendent — which is identified as the source of the power, which can give laws to the people and then reward and punish them, nevertheless it is unobservable and unknowable. Today, says Kaplan, people can accept only what they can prove through their experience. It's obvious that traditional religious beliefs are no longer vital and meaningful, and religion itself loses its essence because it is not able to function as it must («The modern-minded Jew cannot consider the miraculous events recorded in the Torah and in the rest of Bible as other than legendary»¹⁷). Kaplan always underlines that religion reacts to the changes in intellectual and social reality. These changes have never been so radical as in the XX century. Modern science formed the most con-

¹⁷*Kaplan, M.* The Future of American Jew. New York, 1949. P. 212

vincing theories of the universe origin and evolution of life on the Earth. Social and political institutes gave full rights to all minorities and opened lots of new opportunities. Modern worldview, according to Kaplan can't accept anything supernatural and never devotes something that doesn't appear in human experience. It stresses the very basis of religion which means that anything else which exists in its context loses its rationale. Also, religious prescriptions don't let the believer realize his potentialities in the modern world. It all makes religion totally unattractive to modern intellectuals and make them leave religious communities. Kaplan's task was to create theology and the system of practices that would be meaningful and interesting to modern Jewish people. In fact he thought that it is occupation of philosophy — to seek harmony among religion, science and social ideals of people.

In order to make religion working and vital once again, Kaplan creates new naturalistic and humanistic theology where God is described as the sum of creative processes in the Universe: «When we say that God is Process, we select, out of the infinite processes in the universe, that complex of infinite forces and relationships which makes for the highest fulfillment of man as a human being and identify it by the term God»¹⁸. He tries to form a basis for new religious beliefs which can be combined with the modern outlook and lead people to salvation. This new version of religion, according to Kaplan, will cause the consequences which traditional religion produced in the past (and can't produce nowadays). At the same time, Kaplan states that Judaism must be reinterpreted as a developing civilization, that enable Jewish people to use new ways to reach salvation. It looks

¹⁸ *Kaplan, M.* Questions Jews Ask. Reconstructionist Press. New York, 1956. P. 103

like that offer can cause lots of actions, that didn't take place in the past. Would it be fair to state, thus, that the true essence of religion is kept in such a way? According to Kaplan, it would, because cognitive, artistic, athletic and other activities, which appear in reconstructed Jewish communal life, lead people to salvation — help people to make progress and make the world better. If in the past intellectual progress was concerned with the studying of the Scripts, today — with the actions directed to understanding the Universe, for this reason it must have different theoretical and institutional basis. Kaplan says that the difference among the understanding of the concept of salvation on different stages of the history of Judaism is, in fact, the difference in the ways of expression of the same principle (here he is again very close to Pierce). People have always recognized the imperfection of the world around them and created an image of the perfect world (which, according to Kaplan, was the image of our world, got rid of its troubles). Religion formed human desire to reach this world with the help of good deeds, which were thought to be rewarded later by God. Earlier people didn't understand that these deeds and acts create that perfect world by themselves (it looks like that thesis was taken from James, who has practically the same passage). Nowadays, according to Kaplan, people are ready to accept the idea that salvation can be reached by themselves, without any supernatural help or grants. Since in the past the actions which led the world to the better were caused by traditional religious beliefs, today they can be initiated by new naturalistic and rationalized theology.

Conclusion Mordecai Kaplan believes, that any object gets its essence through the special function, what, in fact, means that it has to produce practical consequences. The object exists when the purpose is realized with the help of it. For Kaplan, religion is not exclusion, and he also views it

instrumentally. Salvation, which is understood by Kaplan as the progress of an individual person as well as of the whole mankind and as the purpose of religion, needs new means. Kaplan's readiness to change the contents of religion in order to reach this goal makes him extremely close to Pragmatism. I hope, that the description of rational procedures, which tie beliefs, traditions and rituals with their rational purpose and reconstruct them in order to serve these aims better, showed that Mordecai Kaplan's thought can be identified as Jewish Pragmatism.

Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904). Logic and dynamics of the affects.

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Abstract: *How should we conceive the relations and the actions of one mind upon another mind? How does a spirit impress another spirit? What Tarde called inter-spiritual psychology (rather than social or even collective psychology) implies an inter-mental logic on which the intra-mental logic is modeled on. Within this original logic, the two basic modes of the soul are the two original driving forces composing the practical (individual and social) syllogism i.e Belief and Desire, true mental quantities.*

Key words: *Interaction, inter-psychology, rationality, mental quantities, practical syllogism*

Introduction

Let me first thank the organizers of this colloquium – for inviting me to talk about the rationality of action. I will talk about an author somewhat forgotten but whose works are

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