

Kaplan, Pragmatism, Feminism

BY MARCIA LIND

It is by now generally accepted that Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionist Judaism bears many of the marks of American pragmatist philosophy. I will begin here to take that general acknowledgement in a direction unlike its usual one: I will sketch how a serious commitment to the sort of pragmatist (methodological) principles that so influenced Kaplan entails a serious commitment to feminism, at least feminism of a certain kind. I am interested in arguing this because I believe that Kaplan is usually seen merely as a *de facto* feminist. I want to say something stronger, something that goes beyond the psychology that Mordecai Kaplan contingently happened to have, and how he happened to behave. I want to say that if we understand the methodological basis of Kaplan's work, it behooves those of us who consider ourselves inheritors of his Judaism to help create feminist Judaism¹ at a theoretical level—or, at least, to understand how a theoretically grounded feminism emerges out of Reconstructionism.

Pragmatism as Data Gathering

There are tremendous overlaps between Kaplan's work and that of William James¹ and John Dewey²—Dewey's *A Common Faith*³, for example, is extraordinary in its subtle articulation of a naturalist theology that many of us are familiar with from reading Kaplan. The connections with James seem less obvious. It is only sometimes acknowledged that James was profoundly religious.⁴ His 'religion' was deeply naturalist, committed to our being intimately and ultimately tied up with nature and thus to whatever source of life there was: "Every bit of us at every moment is part and parcel of a wider self, it quivers along various radii like the wind-rose on a compass, and the actual in it is continuously one with possibles not yet in our present sight."⁵

But James was also a 'methodological naturalist.' He was committed to a sort of down-to-earth data gathering when he wanted to make important generalizations: "the only things that shall be debatable among philoso-

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phers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience.” Even more strongly: “Woe to him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience; they will lead him nowhere or else make false connexions.”⁶

And it is that parallel in Kaplan—the methodological naturalism—that I am interested in here—particularly as it gets transformed and applied in Kaplan’s views on community and the importance of everyone’s voice being present in the creating of rules or laws governing Jewish community.

Some History: Empirical Ethics

But first, some history. The commitment to what I am calling ‘methodological naturalism’ or ‘the pragmatist/naturalist methodology’ derives from sources anterior to pragmatism—call it the empirical strain in ethics—that I want to quickly (and very selectively) canvass.

Let’s look at two philosophical predecessors regarding empirical methodology: Aristotle and Hume.⁷ Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*⁸ is committed to a naturalist/empirical method that entails ‘scouring the landscape.’ To ‘scour the landscape’ would be to take the opinion of everyone into account regarding (to take but one of Aristotle’s questions) what happiness consists of. Is happiness, Aristotle wants to know, about making money, or living the political life, or having a life of study or of contemplation? What Aristotle does in order to answer this question, instead of

‘scouring the landscape,’ is to canvass only those people his metaphysics allow him to consider as fully human. That does not include, for example, slaves and women.⁹ By our current lights, Aristotle left out whole groups of people who should have been included in his data base had he really been ‘scouring the landscape’ for opinions in the way his methodology required.

The story is much the same in David Hume, and it emerges most clearly in his aesthetic theory.¹⁰ Hume’s aesthetics depend on a figure he calls ‘the good critic.’ The ‘good critic,’ like the ‘impartial/ideal observer’ in his ethics, is supposed to represent how all people—merely by virtue of being human—react when they are ‘healthy’ or ‘well-functioning.’ The good critic is supposed to represent the ‘natural’ (and thus, normative) reactions of all humans.

But upon closer inspection, it turns out that the ‘good critic’ is not a mere ‘well-functioning’ or ‘healthy’ human, who can represent the reactions of all people. Rather, the ‘good critic,’ for Hume, is a kind of composite derived from the reactions of only certain kinds of people: those who have been educated in the appreciation of ‘superior’ beauties. And Hume tells us explicitly that ‘Indians and savages’ can never become good critics. ‘Negroes,’ as he calls them, simply don’t have—and can’t ever be educated to have—the capacities and judgments of those (such as, he believes, Caucasians) who are further along the evolutionary scale. Whatever

er the composite of the 'good critic' is, under the rubric of representing the universal (when well-functioning) human reaction, Hume has represented only the reactions of a very small sub-set of people. The conclusions he gets about what are the 'correct' aesthetic reactions are therefore seriously biased.

There is a common problem, then, in Aristotle and Hume; in neither case do they take their own methodologies seriously enough. They do not really 'scour the landscape;' rather, they scour it selectively. *For to really 'scour the landscape' is not to leave whole groups out of your data base.*

Kaplan's Inclusiveness

By the time this empiricist/naturalist method got to Mordecai Kaplan, it was clear how important it was to not leave any relevant groups out of consideration. Because of his views about human equality and representation of that equality, Kaplan was well-placed to understand this. Witness his saying, "not only must no Jew be excluded from the Jewish community for his opinions and beliefs, but the community must provide in its administration for a proper and proportionate representation of every Jewish trend."¹¹

Further, Kaplan knew, at least as regarded women, that this would mean tremendous work within Judaism. "Whatever the woman's lot may have been in past Jewish life, traditional Jewish law undoubtedly treated her as a lower type of human being than man. In Jewish law, the woman

is on the same plane with minors, slaves, and people of unsound mind. Like them she is exempted from all observances which are intended for fixed times, with very few exceptions."¹² "Since we cannot honestly assume that the laws as formulated in the traditional codes meant women to enjoy [that] equality, we must, if we believe in the equality of the sexes, make the necessary changes in law and custom as a conscious and deliberate amendment to earlier standards. This is an example of a planned reconstruction of Jewish law and Jewish life."¹³

When Kaplan talked about 'proper and proportionate' representation for all Jews, he meant women as well as men—and knew just how difficult it would be to achieve this. I submit that Kaplan really was committed to 'scouring the landscape,' attempting to properly use the method that the pragmatists and Kaplan himself had inherited. The flawed empiricism of the past would no longer do.

Feminist Theologies

Now look at breakthrough feminist theologies in this light:

Plaskow: "The need for a feminist Judaism begins with hearing silence. It begins with noting the absence of women's history and experiences as shaping forces in the Jewish tradition. Half of Jews have been women, but men have been defined as normative Jews, while women's voices and experiences are largely invisible."¹⁴

Ruether: "The naming of males as norms of authentic humanity has

caused women to be scapegoated for sin and marginalized in both original and redeemed humanity...Women, as the denigrated half of the human species, must reach for a continually expanding definition of inclusive humanity—inclusive of both genders.”¹⁵

The demand is for a voice—to be taken into account. In the terms I have been describing above, the demand is that the methodology not be [gender] biased. This is a demand—as I hope is now apparent—very much in the spirit of the pragmatic, empirical methodology that underlay Kaplan’s Reconstructionism. Ironically, feminism has itself risked replicating the very problem it was poised to solve—making sure everyone was represented. A quick historical sketch will be helpful.

Women’s Voice or Voices?

We saw directly above the demand for the inclusion of a ‘women’s voice’ in theology—similarly in feminist moral psychology. The missing ‘women’s voice’ was most often characterized in a very limited way: as the voice laden with emotion, the voice arising out of community, the voice of empathy, the voice of maternal attention. Witness Carol Gilligan saying that “women perceive and construe social reality differently from men...Women’s sense of integrity appears to be intertwined with an ethic of care, so that to see themselves as women is to see themselves in a relationship of connection.”¹⁶

Such claims regarding what has come to be called the ‘ethics of care’

are now widely questioned. Feminist philosophers doubt whether the ‘female’ voice is indeed the voice of emotion, whether the ‘female’ context is indeed ‘community,’ and, perhaps most importantly, whether there is any such viable notion as a ‘female’ or ‘maternal’ voice at all.¹⁷ Rather, this ‘female’ voice, whether represented as the voice of ‘care’ or as something else, was seen to represent only a small slice of what a small group of women felt or thought. Thus, “feminism has been preoccupied with gender...[but] the phrases ‘as a woman’ and ‘oppressed as a woman,’ and attempts to isolate gender from race and class, typically ...obscure the race and class identity of white middle-class women.”¹⁸

That is, talk about ‘women’ or the ‘woman’s voice’ or ‘women being more compassionate than men’ is now taken by much of current feminist philosophy¹⁹ to be a cover for talk about only a certain kind of women. Albeit unintentionally, such talk makes all other sorts of women invisible. And for what it is worth, the ‘ethics of care’ itself is also considered greatly suspect. As feminist philosopher Claudia Card has put it: “The language of care can cover a reality of abuse in more than one way. It can cover the carer’s own manipulation or abuse, and it can refer to caring unreciprocated by others...Values exalted by women’s ethic of care have made it difficult or impossible for women to escape abusive relationships and to seek desperately needed assistance for themselves... How much of women’s self-defined ethic of care is a slavish

ethic of envy and hatred? What have women identified as 'mere justice'?"²⁰

Essentialism Is Exclusionary

False positing of an 'essence' of 'woman'—'essentialism'—is dangerous because it produces and reproduces exclusion. This is the kind of exclusion that feminism—and, I might add, Kaplan's 'democratic' version of Judaism—was initially designed to counter. Allowing only the voice of white middle-class heterosexual childbearing women to represent all women is a problem we currently face (and must continue to be wary of) in the continuing construction of a feminist Judaism,²¹ especially a feminism grounded in a broad-based synagogue-going population.²²

Rather, we need to make sure that women's voices, whether added to our scholarship or our liturgy, whether gathered from our history or our current situations, preserve and honor difference: the woman scholar as well as the mother, the fighter as well as the nurturer, single and childless as well as married, book-loving as well as people-loving, lesbian as well as heterosexual. Anything less not only replicates the very problem with which we began, but betrays our faith and trust and hopes for any kind of reconstructed Judaism or feminism.

In sum, then, to add a 'woman's voice' to Judaism, without problematizing what that might be, without appropriately understanding the diversity of that voice, risks reinstating the partial perspective Kaplan was concerned to be rid of.

Further, such an unproblematized, essentialist 'woman's voice' does not meet the criteria of an important strand in pragmatist/naturalist methodology, namely James' anti-essentialism, which says that "there is no property absolutely essential to any one thing."²³

I started by saying I would sketch a narrative that would help us appreciate that to be committed to the methodology underlying Kaplan's pragmatist Judaism is also to be committed to feminism of a certain kind. I also said that this commitment is not just *de facto*, but theoretically governed. I hope it is now clear why I think this and what I think that 'kind' of feminism is. It is an anti-essentialist feminism, one pledged to problematizing and probing the notion of a 'female voice,' a notion that looked, for a time, as if it were an appropriate continuation of Kaplan's legacy.²⁴♦

1. On Feminist Judaism, see Susannah Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist* (New York: Schocken, 1983); Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990); Judith Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford, 1988); Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken, 1984); Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, ed., *Weaving the Visions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989); Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981); Irena Klepfisz, *Dreams of An Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches, and Diatribes* (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990); Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Tikva Frymer Kensky, *In The Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*

- (New York: Free Press, 1992); Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994); Ellen Umansky and Dianne Ashton, eds., *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Also see articles by Rachel Adler [e.g. "The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies," *Tikkun* (Nov-Dec. 1988)]; Laura S. Levitt [e.g. *Religious Studies Review* (20), No. 1, Jan. 1994]; and Susan Shapiro [e.g. "Rhetoric as Ideology Critique," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (1994)]."
2. See Allan Lazaroff, "Kaplan and John Dewey," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, ed. Emmanuel Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert Seltzer (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1990), 173-96; Jack Cohen, *The Case for Religious Naturalism* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1958); Richard Libowitz, "Mordecai Kaplan as Redactor: the Development of Reconstructionism," Ph.D. Dissertation, Temple University, 1978; S. Daniel Breslauer, *Mordecai Kaplan's Thought in a Postmodern Age* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1994).
 3. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New York: Yale University Press, 1934).
 4. Look at Oliver Wendell Holmes' saying: "I now see, as I have seen in his other books that I have read, that the aim and end of the whole business is religious." Cited in John McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), 1977, xxvi.
 5. *Writings of William James*, xlix.
 6. *Writings of William James*, xxx.
 7. For an extended treatment, see my "Emotion and Hume's Moral Theory," Ph.D. Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988.
 8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1985).
 9. For an extended treatment of these issues, see, for example, Susan Okin's *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992) or Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), Ch. 2.
 10. David Hume, "Of The Standard of Taste," from *Of The Standard of Taste and Essays* (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1965). Also see my "Indians, Savages, Peasants and Women" in Bat-Ami Bar On, *Modern Engendering: Critical Feminist Readings in Modern Western Philosophy* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993), my "Hume's Racism," unpublished ms.; and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingency of Values* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
 11. From *The Future of the American Jew* (1948), as cited in Kaplan's *Dynamic Judaism, The Essential Writings of Mordecai Kaplan*, ed. Emmanuel Goldsmith and Mel Scult (New York: Fordham University Press/The Reconstructionist Press, 1985), 162.
 12. *Dynamic Judaism*, 188
 13. *Dynamic Judaism*, 239
 14. Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1.
 15. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 20.
 16. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 20, 121.
 17. See Claudia Card, "A Review of Women and Moral Theory," *Ethics* (Oct., 1988), 127; and Spelman, *Inessential Woman*.
 18. Spelman, *Inessential Woman*, 165.
 19. See Card; Spelman; Linda Nicolson and Nancy Fraser, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy," in Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
 20. Card, 129-30.
 21. Judith Plaskow, Irena Klepfisz, Daniel Boyarin and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, have been particularly careful in this regard.
 22. For the importance of 'grass roots' in the construction of feminist theory, see Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Sussex, ENG: Rowman and Allenfeld, 1983).
 23. *Writings of William James*, xxxix.
 24. Thanks to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Susan Shapiro, Steve Sager, John McDermott, Linda Nicolson, Jacob Staub, Mary Fulker-son, for conversation and/or readings that helped with this article. All mistakes, of course, are my responsibility.