Yeshayahu Leibowitz: Jewish existentialism

ROI BENBASSAT

Institute of Comparative Ethics, Freie Universität Berlin, Habelschwerdter Allee 45,
14195 Berlin, Germany
e-mail: rbhead@gmail.com

Abstract: **This article presents Yeshayahu Leibowitz's conception of Judaism and characterizes his position as typically religious-existentialist. It confronts Leibowitz's conception with Kantian ethics, refutes the analogy made between these two conceptions, and shows that Leibowitz's response to Kant is analogous to that of Kierkegaard, the Christian existentialist thinker. It considers Leibowitz's religious position a Jewish variation of Kierkegaard's notion of faith in the absurd. Such an analogy enables us not only to elucidate Leibowitz's religious conception but also to evaluate the implications of Kierkegaard's religious thought in a broader context.**

Introduction

The Israeli intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz profoundly influenced an entire generation of academic thinkers as well as lay readers and audiences in his home country on scientific, philosophical, religious, political, social, and moral issues. Yet his original and unique concept of Jewish religiosity has hardly been adopted by other Jewish thinkers and practitioners, in Israel or abroad. His religious conception presents intellectual, psychological, and practical challenges that render it an arduous undertaking. Nevertheless, this position deserves attention and wider acknowledgement as it presents a highly resilient form of Jewish religiosity, capable of enduring the most vigorous philosophical and ethical criticism from the Enlightenment to our time.

The essential characteristic of Leibowitz's concept of Judaism is the reduction of this religion to its merely practical aspect. This purely practical concept of Judaism is radical and unprecedented. In an important paper (published in English), Avi Sagi presented Leibowitz's conception as 'a breakthrough in Jewish philosophy: religion without metaphysics' (Sagi (1997)). The dismissal of metaphysics is manifest in Leibowitz's thought at two levels, Sagi notes: 'first, in the denial of

141

theology, and second, in the denial of "religious facts" ' (*ibid.*, 206). This means that according to Leibowitz a religious Jew needs not hold any beliefs with regard to the nature and the works of God, nor presuppose the occurrence of any historical event to support his religious standpoint. The institution of *Halakha* alone defines the Jewish religion, namely, its system of duties, whereas any other feature of this religion is dismissible. Judaism is thus conceived of as a 'normative system', or 'commitment to a legal system' (*ibid.*, 210, 212).

According to Leibowitz, Judaism belongs to the distinctive domain of values and practical duties. In his view, this domain as a whole is absolutely independent of cognitive determinations of our minds, such as perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and knowledge. This distinction allowed Leibowitz – himself a scientist and an orthodox Jew – to exempt the modern religious practitioner from confronting any historical and scientific refutations of his religion. Judaism in particular, he claimed, as a purely normative system, does not conflict with science or any other doctrine of knowledge (see *Emuna*, 11; *Judaism*, 132–141; *Sihot*, 7).[1] It is, however, essentially in conflict with other ethical doctrines, other systems of duties and values (*Judaism*, 6f.). On this platform Leibowitz presents a remarkable defence of the 'particularity' of Judaism against the universal claims of ethics. The success of these endeavours, however, must be evaluated within an account of his religious position as a whole.

My main objective here is to analyse Leibowitz's religious conception within the ethical realm, in a way that leads, I believe, to a closer understanding of it. From an ethical perspective scholars have previously highlighted the influence of Immanuel Kant on Leibowitz's thought, and even presented the structure of his position as analogous to that of Kantian ethics, portraying it as a *deontological* position (Kasher (1977)).[2] I intend to refute this analogy and to characterize Leibowitz's religious position as typically existentialist.

Contrary to the most prominent Jewish thinkers since the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), Leibowitz did not attempt to reconcile Judaism with universal moral values, basically positing it instead as conflicting with all aspects of humanism (*Judaism*, 6f.).[3] For him, Jewish faith defies human needs, human interests, human values and human intellect altogether. The binding of Isaac represents in his eyes the ultimate example of this: 'the highest symbol of the Jewish faith is the stance of Abraham on Mount Moriah, where all human values were annulled and overridden by fear and love of God' (*ibid.*, 14). This is the point where some scholars have remarked the most apparent affinity between Leibowitz and Kierkegaard, especially in reference to Kierkegaard's interpretation of the binding of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* (see Sigad (1977); Sagi (1989); Harvi (2002)).

Clearly, both Kierkegaard and Leibowitz reacted most fiercely against Enlightenment attempts to reconcile religion with reason and morals, highlighting precisely the gap between religious and moral duty. However, this is merely a

symptom, I claim, of a more fundamental analogy between the two thinkers. Although Leibowitz himself referred but rarely (and mainly negatively) to Kierkegaard,[4] and generally presented Judaism in sheer opposition with Christianity, I propose to understand his religious position as a variation of Kierkegaard's faith in the absurd, developed from the same typical existentialist conception of ethics.

When I characterize Leibowitz's position as 'existentialist', this may be understood in a sense that generally applies to existentialist thinkers: an individualist point of view that practically does not accept objective systems of duties as valid by themselves, but only by virtue of purely subjective choice – a choice that shapes the life and the selfhood of the individual. This general sense of existentialism may suit atheist thinkers like Sartre as well as Kierkegaard. However regarding Leibowitz this characterization may seem very odd to those who are familiar with his religious conception, which often appears to annul the status of the individual and subjectivity (see Miron (2007)). I should therefore make my claim more plausible by refining the term existentialism.

The existentialist point of view, as I see it, generally forms a distinctive normative structure that in ethical terms cannot be defined either as deontological or as teleological. It is typically paradoxical. Kierkegaard first laid down this distinctive structure in his criticism of Kantian and post-Kantian ethical doctrines. I have already discussed elaborately this distinctive structure elsewhere (Benbassat (2012)), so here I will draw on that earlier work and present it only briefly. Although atheist existentialists may adopt this typical ethical structure too, the affinity of Leibowitz's position with Kierkegaard's religious existentialism is clearly more profound. I specifically aim to show here that it is on this basis that both Kierkegaard and Leibowitz developed a specific concept of religiousness beyond morals and against reason. Thus, observing Leibowitz's position as existentialist may not only contribute to the understanding of his particular version of Judaism, but also demonstrate the possible incarnations of Kierkegaard's conception within different religions.

With this aim in view I will first present Leibowitz's concept of Judaism, emphasizing the more relevant points; then I will reconsider the structure of his religious position through its confrontation with Kantian ethics; Finally, I will expose the analogy between Leibowitz's and Kierkegaard's ethical and religious thought.

Leibowitz's concept of Judaism

Leibowitz characterizes Judaism as an institutional religion, to be understood in a radical sense that in this religion 'the institutions of Halakhic practice are constitutive. Apart from them Judaism does not exist' (*Judaism*, 4). This drastic characterization determines that all other various aspects of the Jewish

religion besides halakhic practice – including the most sacred beliefs of most Jewish believers – are non-essential, often falsifying elements. According to Leibowitz, there is no single belief or set of beliefs shared by all Jewish practitioners at all times. Historically, only the commitment to Halakha united Jewish believers, while individuals and movements that neglected strict observance of the *mitzvoth* (halakhic duties) were eventually ejected from Judaism: 'Only by virtue of the Halakha was Judaism delimited as a single independent and autonomous unit distinguishable from others. Within Judaism, faith is a superstructure rising above the Mitzvoth; the Mitzvoth do not subserve faith . . . Judaism as a historic entity was not constituted by its sets of beliefs' (*ibid.*, 6).

The constitutive role of the Halakha in Judaism, however, has not only a historical sense for Leibowitz – it determines the nature and structure of Jewish religiosity. The religious practice is prior to any cognitive and emotional aspect of Jewish religiosity (*ibid.*, 4). One is obliged to undertake the halakhic duties regardless of what one feels or believes, even regarding the existence of God, which is considered here not as a reason for undertaking the religious practice but as its consequence.

This is an extraordinary position. Normally, we would think of faith as the reason for a religious practice: 'I believe, therefore I observe my religious duties.' It is quite the opposite for Leibowitz: 'I observe the *mitzvoth*, therefore I believe in the God of Israel.' The religious practitioner does not fulfil his religious duties because he has faith, but rather his commitment to his religious duties constitutes his faith. In Leibowitz's words: 'I have been privileged to recognize the Giver of the Torah [the Law] as a result of having accepted the yoke of the Torah and its Mitzvoth' (*ibid.*, 5). This unusual viewpoint is the heart of Leibowitz's position. We cannot understand the uniqueness of Judaism, he claims, unless we consider the Torah as 'data preceding recognition of the Giver of the Torah "to whom there is no analogy whatsoever" ' (*ibid.*).

'To whom there is no analogy whatsoever' refers to Maimonides' theory of the negation of divine attributes. Leibowitz thereby attaches himself to a central pillar of Jewish thinking, thus presenting his own position as less extraordinary than it may seem. Following Maimonides, he insists that we cannot possibly know God positively – neither His nature nor His works within the world. Nonetheless, there is one divine attribute we ought to assume, according to both Leibowitz and Maimonides, namely that He is 'the Giver of the Torah' (as the Halakha determines). This is the only essential assumption of Jewish faith in Leibowitz's view: 'The assumption of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven is nothing other than the assumption of the yoke of Torah and Mitzvoth' (*ibid.*, 38).

More will be said of this assumption later, but for now let us be clear about Leibowitz's notion. He claims that God's existence is derived from observance of the Halakha. One who accepts halakhic law as absolutely binding thereby accepts the existence of God as 'the Giver of the Torah'. Thus the Halakha posits God as its

source, just as it determines the sacred status of the Bible, not vice versa (*ibid.*, 11f.).[5]

We may now comprehend the far-reaching sense in which the Halakha is constitutive in Leibowitz's concept of Judaism, and 'faith is a superstructure rising above the Mitzvoth'. It follows that there is no faith in Judaism apart from the very act of binding oneself to the practice of Halakha. It means too that the law's absolute validity is not derived from anything outside itself – this is what the (Leibowitizian) Jewish believer acknowledges in faith.

Obviously Leibowitz formulates a particular concept of faith, which we can define more closely. Faith in Judaism is not a belief that precedes the recognition of the Halakha as God's commandment, but is this recognition itself.[6] In its purified form, faith is the recognition of the halakhic law as a Jew's absolute duty, a duty toward God. What is the nature of this recognition? Leibowitz makes clear that it is not a matter of belief, opinion, or knowledge but of decision or choice:

> [R]eligious faith . . . is rather an *evaluative decision* that one makes, and, like all evaluations, it does not result from any information one has acquired, but is *a commitment to which one binds himself*. In other words, faith is not a form of cognition; it is a conative element of consciousness. (*ibid.*, 37)

Faith is a value-determination, says Leibowitz, and like any other personal decision to live according to certain values and duties, it is a *conative* determination, determination of the will. Leibowitz stresses that this category is completely separated from that of 'cognitive determinations' of the mind (see *Judaism*, 137; *Sihot*, 7; *Yahadut*, 355f.). Thus duties and values do not depend on any knowledge but express what we want and decide to do. This distinction is far more radical than Kant's famous distinction between what 'is' and what 'should be' (*CPR*, 695f.),[7] and places Leibowitz, as I will try to show, in line with existentialist thought.

Faith, in Leibowitz's terms, is a free choice to submit oneself to halakhic practice – 'I practise Judaism because I want to'. However, as a value-determination, faith is distinguished from immediate determinations of the will like those expressing natural needs and desires. 'Values, contrary to needs, are measured by what man is willing to give up for them, and not by what they give to man' (*Sihot*, 34). Therefore to have faith in Judaism means not just to want to practise the Halakha, but to be willing to give up everything for the sake of religion.[8] Faith determines 'the supreme value before which all human considerations must be set aside' – and 'the ultimate requires no further justification' (*Judaism*, 160).[9]

According to Leibowitz, no justification is required for a value-determination in general, in particular for a faithful person. We can justify our decisions regarding relative ends of our actions that are aimed at attaining other ends, and so forth. However, what we hold as the ultimate end and value of our lives does not and cannot have further justification. Can we justify, for example, our striving

for happiness as our natural ultimate end? Similarly, and even more distinctively (as we shall see), the Jewish religious value requires no justification in Leibowitz's view.

Considering faith as an unjustifiable value-determination is crucial for Leibowitz. Within Judaism, he notes, there are two ways of practising religion: *lishma* and not-*lishma* (for its own sake and not for its own sake). To observe the Halakha not for its own sake is to posit it as a relative value, an end designed to achieve other goals, needs, and interests. This actually deprives the practice of Judaism of its religious meaning, since only when it is considered as a superior value – unjustifiable in terms of human interests – can it be regarded as the service of God. Only the practice of Judaism for its own sake establishes a *theocentric*, not an *anthropocentric* religion (*ibid.*, 65f., 208f.). Hence *lishma* is the superior type of Jewish religiosity to which all practitioners should aspire (*ibid.*, 67). *Lishma* is faith in its purest sense, the determination of halakhic practice as a superior value.

We have seen that Leibowitz defines Judaism as essentially a system of duties, so that its faith is only one's determination to submit to this system as a superior value. This narrow definition allowed him to undermine the status of the Bible (and other Jewish texts) as a reliable source for cosmological and historical knowledge, or as a philosophical work (*ibid.*, 11). It also permitted contempt for the 'holiness' attributed to people and places:[10] the particularity of the 'chosen people' is not a factual distinction but a task; it is the people required to serve God through halakhic practice (*ibid.*, 86). It allowed him to reject all theological assumptions regarding God's nature and works (as we noted), and finally, to dismiss beliefs in the afterlife and the eternity of the soul, leaving a pure practical system:

> The first mark of the religion of Halakhah is its realism. It perceives man as he is in reality and confronts him with this reality – with the actual conditions of his existence rather than the 'vision' of another existence. Religion is concerned with the status, the function, and the duties of man, as constrained by these circumstances. It precludes the possibility of man's shirking his duties by entertaining illusions of attaining a higher level of being . . . (*ibid.*, 12)

Leibowitz expressed this concise concept of Judaism by also denying the distinction between the terms 'religion' and 'faith' (see *ibid.*, 37–47). If the halakhic institution is the only essential content of Judaism, then these two terms refer to the same thing, he claimed (*ibid.*, 38). However, this formulation may mislead, and it is important to revise it. Even if we adopt Leibowitz's terms, clearly there remain two distinct components of Judaism: one objective and the other subjective. The Halakha is the objective element, a specific system of duties that applies to Jews, whereas faith as a value-determination is the subjective element – a decision of the individual to posit submission to this system as his highest end. This observation is crucial as we address the ethical structure of this position and its problems.

The ethical structure of Jewish religiosity: Leibowitz and Kant

The relation between the two normative components of Leibowitz's concept of Judaism – Halakha and faith – determines the structure and nature of his position. Normally it seems that this structure is already determined clearly by stating that 'faith is a superstructure rising above the Mitzvoth'. Leibowitz stressed that the first necessary condition for Jewish religiosity is the practice of its system of duties, while faith as a value-determination comes second. The subjective element (faith) is conditioned by the objective element (duty), whereas the objective element, so it seems, stands on its own. The following passage from Leibowitz supports this perspective:

> Two types of religiosity may be discerned: one founded in values and beliefs from which follow requirements of action, the other posited on imperatives of action, the observance of which entails values and intention. The religion of values and beliefs is an endowing religion – a means of satisfying man's spiritual needs and of assuaging his mental conflicts. Its end is man, and God offers his services to man. . . . a religion of Mitzvoth is a demanding religion. It imposes obligations and tasks and makes of man an instrument for the realization of an end which transcends man. The satisfactions it offers are those deriving from the performance of one's duty . . . The two types of religiosity may be found within all religions, but religions differ from one another in the extent to which one type predominates. (*ibid.*, 13f.)

Distinguishing between 'endowing religion' and 'demanding religion' is parallel to the common practice of distinguishing between deontological and teleological doctrines in ethics. To be sure, deontological doctrines are understood as positing duties that are valid in themselves, independently of any determination of ends; while teleological doctrines are those in which duties are validated only by certain end-determinations (among the latter we count eudaemonist, utilitarian, and consequentialist standpoints). We may gather from the foregoing that Leibowitz's concept of Judaism is analogous to a deontological doctrine. One can sense the echoes of Kantian ethics particularly in Leibowitz's thought. Jewish duty has nothing really to do with human interests, he claims. It is a religion that posits objective duties prior to and unconditioned by human values and ends.

An important analogy between Leibowitz's concept of Judaism and Kantian ethics was first drawn by Naomi Kasher (1977), who specifically compared Leibowitz's distinction between *lishma* (abiding by religious duty for its own sake) and not-*lishma* to Kant's distinction between legal actions, 'in accordance with duty', and genuine moral actions performed 'from duty'. In both doctrines, the objective aspect of duty – legality of actions in Kant and *mitzvoth* in Judaism – is determined first independently, thus forming the unconditional condition for morality or religiosity. It is a necessary but not a sufficient condition, as pure intent of the subject is then also required: pure *respect* for the law in Kantian ethics and faith (*lishma*) in Leibowitz's position (*ibid.*, 22). Leibowitz himself accepted this

analogy ('Tguvot', 278), and reinforced it by stressing the importance of the distinction between *lishma* and not-*lishma*:

> Without this distinction the world of Jewish faith . . . cannot be fully comprehended. God may be worshipped on two levels, representing two different types of motivation. In the terminology of ethical theory, one might say that faith and Torah may be conceived deontically, and also along consequentialist lines. The Torah admits both levels. (*Judaism*, 40)

Indeed, the Torah also admits the consequentialist level of religious practice, to make it easier and accessible for all Jewish practitioners. Clearly, however, Leibowitz considered the deontological level superior, and did not approve of the consequentialist line. To practise Judaism for personal ends (not-*lishma*) is to turn it into an 'endowing religion' where God 'offers his services to man', while to fulfil halakhic duty for its own sake expresses a pure intention to serve God. *Lishma*, the determination of the religious practice itself as a superior value, is what a Jew is primarily commanded by Halakha, according to Leibowitz, namely, *to love God*:

> The acceptance of the yoke of Torah and Mitzvoth is the love of God, and it is this that constitutes faith in God . . . The Lord is the Giver of the Torah, and the belief in him is man's acknowledgment of the obligation to abide by the Torah. Since the Mitzvoth have no utilitarian significance and are not intended to satisfy human needs, their observance by man is an act of sheer love. (*ibid.*, 45)

To love God, for Leibowitz, means to abide by halakhic duty for its own sake.[11] Thus, Judaism in its purest form is presented as a deontological position in which duty ought to be respected regardless of the subject's intentions and ends. As in Kantian ethics, the subjective element is required only on the basis of an objectively predetermined system of duties.

However, I believe there is a good reason to doubt this analogy and question whether Leibowitz's position is truly deontological as claimed. A deontological position requires an objective foundation of duty that allows it to be recognized as valid regardless of end-determinations. Whereas in Kantian ethics reason grants duty absolute validity, what does so in Leibowitz's position? One may reply that it is God – the Halakha is the law of God, therefore it is objectively and absolutely valid. But this would not be sufficient. The ancient Greeks also ascribed the laws of their states to the gods. The question concerns precisely the validity of these claims, as anyone can arbitrarily assert that something comes from a god.

Leibowitz as a religious Jew held that Halakha was the only law of God. However, he evades the arbitrary nature of this claim by his view (previously noted) that Halakha is 'data preceding recognition of the Giver of the Torah'. The belief in God cannot then grant validity to the halakhic law, since the existence of God is acknowledged only as a result of the observance of the Halakha. But if so, the question remains and even gains force: what then is the basis of the Halakha as absolute duty?

The only answer Leibowitz provides indicates halakhic practice as a value. As noted, he claims that a person's recognition of the Halakha as absolute duty is not based on any cognition but is a value-determination, a *conative* determination not requiring further justification. But this answer undermines the entire deontological structure of Leibowitz's concept of Judaism. The only basis for the absolute validity of the Halakha seems now to be faith (the specific value-determination of the Jewish practitioner), which is a purely subjective positing of a superior end, but this renders Leibowitz's position somewhat *teleological* in ethical terms.

There is no similar difficulty in Kantian ethics. Here we find firm objective justification for the absolute validity of moral duty. Kant's original idea was that duty is based on pure reason, discovered within the subject as objective. Duty expresses the mere form of practical reasoning (the categorical imperative) (*G*, 164). Thus according to Kant duty is a kind of cognition – one that appears *a priori*, necessarily, and equally in the consciousness of every human being. As we know the moral law a priori, it is an eternal law, universally and absolutely valid in all times.[12] The validity of duty is therefore objectively acknowledged, regardless of our ends.

Duties are prior to end-determinations in Kantian ethics since they can be validated by thought, separately from end-determinations. Ends are not involved in the validation of duty, nor are they required for the performance of duty (*REL*, 57). By means of his original concept of duty Kant was able to demand the performance of duty 'from duty', without referring to ends. Since it expresses the mere form of practical reasoning, duty can determine our will in a distinctive manner, as a cause and not as an end (*G*, 56). This is the unique quality by which *respect* for the moral law differs from all other determinations of the will, which involve ends with regard to sensible objects (in space and time). Hence the deontological structure of Kantian ethics is assured, while that of Leibowitz's position is not.

Leibowitz's idea of performance of religious duty for its own sake (*lishma*) is not analogous to Kant's pure respect for the law, because halakhic duty cannot be held as a formal causal determination of our will. By *lishma* Leibowitz means, as we noticed, to regard duty itself as an end, a superior value. This is not at all possible for Kant, considering the unique quality of respect for the law as a determination of the will. All ends in Kant's view must refer to objects in the sensible world, in space and time, and eventually to happiness as the superior end of man – 'the sum of satisfaction of all inclinations' (*ibid.*, 54). Accordingly, duty itself as a pure object of reason cannot represent an end. However, duty can be attached to an end as a condition for its attainment. Thus Kant posited an ideal world in which happiness is conditioned by moral behaviour as the end of moral existence, 'the highest good' (*CPrR*, 228–236). To direct ourselves to such an end we must postulate the existence of a God who can create such a

world – this is how morality leads to religion in Kant's thought (*ibid.*, 239–246; *REL*, 58).

Now, Leibowitz might have been inspired by Kant's practical postulation of God's existence. Yet he criticizes Kant precisely for positing God as a 'guarantor' for man's efforts to achieve morality and happiness (*Emuna*, 48).[13] Judaism, by contrast, conceives of a God that does not grant anything, but only demands. The end-determination of the religious Jew is not separated from duty but is duty itself in the form of Halakha, conceived of as man's service to God. *Lishma*, therefore, is not an appropriate analogy to Kant's respect for the moral law.

It may be more appropriate to compare faith (*lishma*) to the 'disposition of the heart' discussed by Kant in his *Religion*, but in my view this analogy cannot stand either. The heart for Kant is where a true value-determination is made. It either posits respect for the law as the superior motivation to which all sensible ends are subordinated (the choice of 'the good heart'), or posits it as conditioned by other ends (the 'corrupted heart') (*REL*, 73, 77f.).[14] Like faith in Leibowitz, this free decision cannot express human needs and desires (determined by nature), but also, as an act of choice, cannot be derived from or explained by any cognitive determination and reasoning. That is why we cannot further understand the heart's choice – it is, according to Kant, 'inscrutable to us' (*ibid.*, 71, 90).

Following the analogy between Leibowitz and Kant, we may say that the Halakha replaces reason in the role of an objective 'legislative authority', whereas faith replaces the heart's choice as a subjective value-determination. Just as in Kant the choice of the heart is possible only on the basis of a prior determination of duty by reason, in Leibowitz faith is a 'superstructure rising above the Mitzvoth'. Nonetheless, contrary to Kant, Leibowitz does not construct the foundation on which duty may be considered as absolutely valid independently of end-determinations. The Halakha may determine itself as the law of God, as absolute duty, but the validity of this determination rests on faith alone, which is a subjective end-determination.

Should we then consider Leibowitz's position as teleological? Hardly, as this would contradict the definition of Judaism as a 'demanding religion' in which 'faith is a superstructure rising above the Mitzvoth'. The content of faith as an end-determination is indeed predetermined here by an objective system of duties (just as in Kant 'the good' must be acknowledged prior to the choice of the heart). Moreover, the very act of faith as a value-determination is a religious duty, as if it were not at all a personal end but 'an end which transcends man' (as noted above). Therefore, although the validity of duty cannot be acknowledged here objectively without faith, still duty cannot be explained as a means of attaining a personal end.

Once again, faith in no way posits an end separate from duty. Rather it posits duty itself as an end (*lishma*). We may say that in faith the purpose of halakhic

practice is to serve God, but in this context it is tautological since halakhic duty defined itself initially as the exclusive form of serving God. That is why faith is not an end-determination that justifies duty, but rather a subjective affirmation of an objective determination.

Leibowitz's concept of Judaism, I claim, is therefore neither deontological nor teleological (or maybe both). It is a paradoxical position that posits duty and an end-determination as mutually conditioned. He himself acknowledged the paradoxical nature of his conception: 'Halakhah is founded on faith, yet at the same time constitutes this faith. In other words, Judaism as a living religion creates the faith upon which it is founded. This is a logical paradox but not a religious paradox' (*Judaism*, 11).

Although recent interpreters undermined the paradoxical nature of this conception, I believe that to claim there is no paradox is to disregard the very essence of Leibowitz's position. These interpretations sought to deny the formation of a paradox while referring to the relation between the institution of Halakha and that of the Bible in Leibowitz's thought (Kasher (1975); Sagi (1997), 208). They regarded faith as represented by the biblical text. However, whereas the Bible can represent people's faith only retrospectively, making value-determinations is the act of living individuals. We cannot avoid the paradox, in my view, when we consider how the individual practitioner must accept the Halakha as the law of God as if we were in the place of this individual. Then we would have to acknowledge that the absolute validity of the Halakha could only be claimed by a vicious circle. Jewish faith in Leibowitz's concept is precisely the affirmation of such a circle: 'I know that this is not a logical definition, because it is circular, but from a historical-empirical point of view there is no other. From a formal-logical point of view the foundation of the validity of the Halakhah is indefinable' (*Olam*, 13).

The foundation of the validity of the Halakha is 'indefinable' because only faith can validate it. But faith is also defined by Halakha: it is the determination of the halakhic practice as an end commanded by Halakha. The individual himself cannot decide in this context what absolute duty is and how to serve God; it is already determined for him by Halakha. However, again, since the Halakha cannot be justified by referring to God as the lawgiver – Leibowitz admits that it is 'a human product' (*Judaism*, 12) – this objective determination can be validated only by faith.

We observe that Halakha is determined as the law of God both by the Halakha itself and by the individual practitioner. Remove either factor and the whole construction collapses. Unlike the case of Kantian ethics, we observe no real priority of duty over subjective end-determination, but mutual conditioning of these two factors. The term 'validity' is redefined here, as it is no longer a matter of pure cognition. The absolute validity of the objective law of the Halakha can be recognized only by the individual's subjective end-determination. Therefore duty

is absolute only in relation to an individual. It is unconditional only by being conditional, which is of course a paradox.

Jewish existentialism: Leibowitz and Kierkegaard

The paradoxical structure of Leibowitz's position may be disqualified from a logical point of view, but not necessarily from a practical one. Considering the question 'What ought I to do in my existence?' or 'To what end should I dedicate my life?', there is no obligation to restrict oneself to rationally justifiable decisions, let alone to follow the scientific criteria. Value-determinations may stem from a deeper source in the human being. Accordingly, we may also think of Kantian ethics as a possible mode of existence that, although subordinated to pure reason, is initiated by a personal choice beyond reason. Leibowitz regards Kant's ethics from this perspective, then defies his idea of true religion, and gives a quite sound reply (in my opinion) to the Enlightenment-era criticism of traditional forms of religion in general. His conception is based, I claim, on a typical existentialist point of view.

Leibowitz is able to confront Kantian ethics by completely separating the realm of values and the realm of cognition. Regardless of any knowledge a person may have, he can regard anything as having absolute value – his family, his people, his native land, universal morals, his own happiness, or his religion. It is a free determination of the will, a choice. Indeed, some choices of values may express (consciously or unconsciously) natural needs or immediate interests, thus precisely depriving the person of freedom (Leibowitz agrees with Kant's understanding of immediate desires as subordinated to the laws of nature and therefore as not free). Yet human beings always choose their values freely from this perspective, even if they choose to enslave themselves to 'earthly matters'.[15]

Personally, Leibowitz held that the choice to serve God within Judaism constitutes his freedom: 'The true meaning of the Tannaitic adage "None but he who busies himself with Torah is free" is that he is free from the bondage of nature because he lives a life which is contrary to nature, both nature in general and human nature in particular' (*Judaism*, 22). Religion releases man from the bonds of Nature by positing man before a God conceived as a transcendent being, absolutely different from anything worldly. Against Kant, Leibowitz claims that reasoning and morals are human constructions that belong to the realm of nature no less than human desires. Moreover, reasoning and morals generally serve human needs, and so also does a religion based on morals (*ibid.*, 20). Consequently the choice to bind oneself to reason and morals is not different in principle from enslaving oneself to natural desires. Only a religion that relates to a true transcendence, totally incomprehensible in human terms, is a genuine religion that can truly free man from the bonds of

nature. Thus Judaism is posited as the antithesis of any philosophical moral standpoint:

> Being moral, from the standpoint of a secular ethic, can have only either of two meanings; directing man's will in accordance with man's knowledge of reality – the ethics of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans and especially the Stoics, and among the later philosophers Spinoza; or directing man's will in accordance with man's recognition of his duty – the ethics of Kant and the German Idealists. Among the passages of the *Shema* we find the words: 'that you seek not after your own hearts and your own eyes': 'after your own hearts' is the negation of Kantian ethics, 'after your own eyes' is the negation of Socrates'. The admonition: 'I am the Lord your God' follows shortly thereafter. (*ibid.*, 18)

The rhetoric of this declaration is efficient, but also questionable. As observed, Leibowitz does not give reasons why we must accept the Halakha as the divine commandment and not, for example, the imperatives of reason or any other system of duties. Only faith, a subjective value-determination, may validate the admonition of the *Shema*. It seems therefore that, in principle, we could have decided just as well to accept any other law as God's commandment and absolutely valid. Such is the implication of conceiving of duty as absolutely valid only by virtue of a subjective determination (the existentialist standpoint, as I see it). True, in the framework of Judaism this end-determination is predetermined by Halakha, and may not affirm any other duty except halakhic duty; however, it is again a matter of choice (even for born Jews) whether to regard oneself in the framework of Judaism, or in a different framework.

Leibowitz chose Judaism. To defend this religion from criticism launched by Enlightenment thinkers in particular and make it acceptable for modern man, he had to challenge the general disposition of philosophy in ethical thinking. Philosophy – in both ethical principles formulated in the quote above – aims to connect the human will with reason. It constantly attempts to define truth as the good and the good as truth. This connection is now contested. Evidently value-determinations do not necessarily follow our understanding of the world, being matters of choice. And even if a law of practical reason is imposed on our thought, as Kant claimed, it does not necessarily follow that it is existentially binding.

We can now understand Leibowitz's reproach to philosophy as equivalent to that of Kierkegaard. 'By what force am I obliged to act upon the law of reason in my existence?', Leibowitz asks Kant. 'By what force does it become my duty?' Only by the force of an absolutely free decision to accept it as such! In Kantian terms, not until a choice of the heart is made does the law of reason become absolutely binding. Beyond human thinking, then, in human existence, the 'categorical imperative' is found to be conditional; it is conditioned by the individual's choice to accept it as absolute duty.[16]

Kierkegaard was the first to present this reply to Kantian and post-Kantian doctrines of morals. Famously, he posited 'choice' as the central term in ethical and religious thinking – a personal, non-communicative decision that is not

subject to any 'reasonable' limitation.[17] The nature of choice in Kierkegaard is debatable,[18] and I do not insist that it is an arbitrary choice (as it is possibly explained in terms of personal development). However, surely the choice in question is not one that could be objectively determined as what is good and right by pure reason. Contrary to Kantian or Hegelian conceptions, Kierkegaard claimed that 'objective thought' has no authority in the ethical-religious realm. Here truth is to be found in subjectivity, and the appropriate term for it is authenticity. As early as in *Either/Or*, he writes: 'Think what you will . . . you never think in the categories of good and evil . . . only when I have absolutely chosen myself have I posited an absolute difference: namely, the difference between good and evil' (*EO2*, 223f.).

Despite recent interpretations that highlight Kierkegaard's affinity to Kant's ethical-religious thought, to me this crucial difference seems undeniable: the ethical distinction between good and evil is constituted by a personal choice, claims Kierkegaard, not by reason or any objective imperative in itself.[19] Indeed, like Kant's choice of the heart, choice here is a 'life task' decision (*ibid.*, 167), a positing of an ultimate end, a *telos* to one's own existence (*CUP*, 313), or, in Leibowitz's terms, a value-determination. However, it is not based on a distinction between good and evil acknowledged a priori as absolutely valid, but is what grants this distinction absolute validity. Without this personal existential decision – for Kierkegaard as for Leibowitz – no duty can be granted absolute validity.

This subjective point of view might have menacing implications in ethics, as it opens up a way to justify immoral acts and ways of life. However, to understand it fully, we must observe that the existentialist standpoint is not a purely subjective arbitrary position, but a mutual conditioning of objective and subjective elements. It does not claim there are only personal decisions, denying the existence of objectively determined duties that everyone normally faces in life. 'My duty is the particular, something for me alone, and yet', Kierkegaard says, 'it is duty and consequently the universal' (*EO2*, 263). 'It is not lawless; neither does it itself establish its law, for the category of duty continues, but the personality takes the form of the unity of the universal and the particular' (*ibid.*, 264).

These statements form Kierkegaard's specific concept of 'the ethical', defined here as the unity between the individual and the universal, the subjective and the objective. It is a purely subjective choice to bind oneself to objective duty, affirming the validity of duty. This must not be confused with the subjective – objective unity constructed by Kantian or Hegelian ethics. By 'subjective' Kierkegaard does not refer to reason as both a personal and universal element in the human mind, but explicitly to a 'passionate' choice (see *CUP*, 313; *EO2*, 167; *FT*, 42). His concept of the ethical, then, reveals a paradoxical structure, analogous to that observed in Leibowitz's conception.

Just as halakhic duty could not be acknowledged as absolutely valid without a personal value-determination, so can't ethical duty here. Kierkegaard's insistence on passion as a condition for the ethical highlights the paradoxical nature of this construction. He emphasizes the pathos-filled nature of positing an end (*telos*) to existence, for which one is willing to renounce everything (*CUP*, 404; *EO2*, 221). However, since passion belongs to the sensible, aesthetic realm of subjectivity, it can only be paradoxical that it is a condition for the validation of objective duty. Thus, whereas Kant concentrated his efforts in establishing ethics on scientific grounds by removing the aesthetical element (sensibility, self-interest, passion), Kierkegaard reintroduces it, aiming to achieve a 'balance between the esthetic and the ethical', consequently placing a contradiction in the heart of the ethical.

Kierkegaard declared the paradoxical nature of ethical choice that involves absolute self-giving (facing duty), and at the same time absolute self-interest, passion (*EO2*, 221). It expresses both the self as it is in the sensible world – a finite being in relation to other finite beings – and at the same time the abstract concept of the self as a free being defined in itself and beyond its worldly relations (*ibid.*, 214f.). 'Philosophy might be right in not being able to conceive an "absolute contradiction"', Kierkegaard states, but 'it by no means follows that this does not exist' (*ibid.*, 223). Conversely, he claims: 'I as free spirit am born out of the principle of contradiction or am born through my choosing myself' (*ibid.*, 215f.).

We may observe that Kant's development of the notion of 'the heart' specifically attempted to avoid this paradox. In *Religion* it transpires that freedom is expressed not only through the causative determination of the will by the moral law of reason (*respect*), but through the crucial choice of positing an end for our existence (either the good or the corrupt one). Only as subjects performing such a choice can we be responsible for both our good and evil ways. However, such a choice cannot be determined by the laws of reason nor can it be determined by the laws of nature and sensibility, for in both cases it would contradict freedom of choice. The problem of explaining it, as we know nothing outside the two realms of sensibility and reason, leads Kant to a quite vague concept such as the heart ('inscrutable to us'). However, 'the heart' is indispensable for Kant, since only through its good choice can the constant connection between the human will and reason be maintained, as a part of the whole creation of a moral, reasonable world, as God presumably would want it to be ('the highest good').

Neither Kierkegaard nor Leibowitz admit to a third layer such as 'the heart' in the personality. In characterizing an existential choice, they state but one category of *conative* determinations, one that includes natural desires and values together. Hence, a value-determination is also depicted as passionate, just like (and even more than) immediate determinations of the will. Consequently, for both thinkers, absolute duty is acknowledged by the paradoxical unity of the most subjective, personal willpower with the objective impersonal law.

It is true that the centres of gravity of these two conceptions are contradictory: while Kierkegaard stresses the importance of subjectivity (in ethics as in religion), Leibowitz insists that Judaism is a demanding religion based not on personal wishes, emotions, or values but on dictated imperatives. In contrast with Kierkegaard, Leibowitz usually disapproved of the 'pathos-filled' manner in which religious practitioners often express their faith. He identified more with the Kantian approach, insisting on the indifferent, non-emotional manner in which one ought to fulfil his duty in Judaism. Consequently the subjective dimension of his religious conception is often disregarded or undermined.[20] Nevertheless, Leibowitz did let us find out that his notion of Jewish religiosity overlies an 'intense pathos':

> Most characteristic of the Halakhah is its lack of pathos . . . it strives to base the religious act . . . on the permanent habit of performing one's duty . . . Precisely this non-pathetic attitude hides a depth of intense pathos. How unfounded is the imaginary antithesis of the inner religious experience and the formalism of the Halakhic praxis, an antithesis so popular amongst the opponents of the religion of Halakhah! (*Judaism*, 13)

Indeed, we may assume that any mode of existence based on a conscious value-determination must be extremely pathos-filled. Positing an end for existence, for which a person is willing to give up everything, requires the passion of infinite resignation, to use Kierkegaard's term (accordingly, it is probably an uncommon occurrence). In Leibowitz's concept of *Torah lishma*, infinite resignation is expressed by the individual's total submission to the halakhic system of laws. The religious person cannot perform this submission indifferently, without pathos, as he must regard it as a sheer expression of freedom. Serving God thereby becomes a most passionate personal interest, an act of love, which produces profound satisfaction (as previously noted). Thus subjectivity may find its utmost expression – a relation to the absolute, freedom and selfhood – precisely by submitting itself to an objective system of obligations that opposes it in its natural immediate state.

The more we penetrate the depth of Leibowitz's pathos within Judaism, the more we find religious experience characterized similarly to that of Kierkegaard. As opposed to the philosophical inclination to establish a connection between the human will and reason, the enthusiasm of this religious standpoint comes precisely from the break with human intellect. 'There is neither a religious nor a philosophic need to assimilate halakhic practice to the concepts or interests of man', says Leibowitz, 'their force lies precisely in their being alien to natural man. Rationalizations of the Mitzvoth . . . are pointless' (*ibid.*, 22). Observe that religious duty is considered not only as opposed to natural human desires, but equally so to reason.

Precisely because the object of faith goes against reason, precisely because it is understood as *absurd*, it establishes a relation to God. This acknowledgement

presents the religious practice as the most passionate activity, the utmost expression of freedom, as it requires the greatest overcoming of the self (so often emphasized by Leibowitz).[21] Leibowitz's statements on the duty of prayer may demonstrate this point.

It is told that, once, while lecturing to an audience in the restaurant of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Leibowitz declared that even if the content of the prayer commanded by *Shulhan Arukh* were that of the restaurant menu, he would have recited it with the same intense devotion (Shavid ([2007](#)), 16). Then he explains that to appeal to God with words is absurd, no matter which words are used.[22] Still, this is what halakhic religion commands a Jew to do. Consider Leibowitz's statement on this point on another occasion:

> No one may think that he [the praying person] has to deliver information to God . . . but if a man thinks [about it] (and it is true that these men usually do not think at all), then he knows that a flesh and blood [being] cannot bless, honour and praise God. This is absurd, but this is the formal manner of serving God. (*Olam*, 111)

The praying person should therefore know that prayer is absurd.[23] Thus cognition might after all play an important role in Leibowitz's position, only a negative one, as it is needed to acknowledge that which exceeds it. The 'absurd' characterization of prayer as a service to God can be applied to all imperatives of the Halakha, covering as they do almost every aspect of a Jew's daily life. Halakhic obligations must be fulfilled without rationalizing them. Rational or utilitarian explanation would deprive them of their religious meaning, as 'their force lies precisely in their being alien to man'. They must therefore be regarded as absurd, and be fulfilled with devotion.

The fundamental assumption of Jewish faith, that the relation between man and God is established exclusively through halakhic practice, may thus be regarded as an absurd by the understanding. Specifically this irrational character of halakhic religion invites the pathos of the individual in its practice, promising a relationship to God and the greatest satisfaction. We can only imagine the enormous effort of overcoming the self that Leibowitz had to make to submit constantly to the strict observance of Jewish practice while, most exceptionally, regarding it as completely senseless from any human perspective. *Torah lishma*, he notes, 'is the greatest and most difficult thing. But the greater the effort, so is the reward' (*Yahadut*, 68). To make it even more difficult (and more similar to Kierkegaard's religious conception), it is important also to note that Leibowitz conceived of this effort as 'a struggle which constitutes a perennial task. If anything may be considered realization of the Torah, it is precisely this struggle' (*Judaism*, 210).

We may now discover Leibowitz's position as a unique variation of Kierkegaard's 'faith in the absurd'. Kierkegaard first presented that concept in his famous interpretation of the biding of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. This model of faith reflects, in my view, both Kierkegaard's concept of Christianity and

Leibowitz's concept of Judaism. Kierkegaard depicted Abraham's faith as a 'double movement': it requires 'infinite resignation' – willingness to sacrifice everything in the name of God – together with the trust that God will give back all that is renounced (*FT*, 35–37, 115). Abraham holds to the two 'movements' simultaneously, expressing faith in the absurd: Isaac must be sacrificed to God, and also be received from God as a gift to Abraham. Even if Isaac dies, Abraham believes, God will revive him (*ibid.*, 36). Thus, trusting that God will return Isaac does not annul the demand or make the sacrifice easier, but is added to the demand in a way that creates more difficulty for the believer by making God incomprehensible.

Kierkegaard explains that if we consider each of these 'movements' separately we refer to something other than faith. Belief in something irrational without infinite resignation (a value-determination) attached to it is just a nonsensical opinion outside the ethical-religious realm (*ibid.*, 47; *CUP*, 557). On the other hand, infinite resignation alone (also required by ethics) is still not faith. It is a 'philosophical movement', he observes, and one does not need faith to perform it (*FT*, 48). Infinite resignation may express man's relation to a philosophical concept of God, definable only negatively as not finite, not temporary, not relative, etc. – as 'absolutely different' (*CUP*, 412f.). This is analogous to Leibowitz's adopting Maimonides' concept of God 'to which there is no analogy whatsoever', and to the general struggle of Judaism against idolatry. Sacrifice, infinite resignation, may be considered a rational relation to the absolute, expressing existentially the logical conception of the absolute, for it is logical to think of it in contrast to anything finite and relative in this world. Therefore, to relate existentially to the absolute in a purely rational manner, one must 'only' be willing to renounce everything.[24]

However, faith is infinite resignation attached to the assumption that we may, after all, affirm something in relation to God, as Abraham regarded Isaac, nevertheless, as a gift from God. Faith involves the assumption that the absolute is incorporated in a certain finite thing in the world – which is *absurd*.[25]

Kierkegaard's concept of Christianity is based on the same model of 'faith in the absurd'. This view may be doubted, as it is true that the word 'absurd' is rarely used in Kierkegaard's later works. Nonetheless, his statements regarding the matter in *Postscript* are definitive:[26]

> Every human being . . . can discover that there is something that is, despite its being against his understanding and thinking. If he stakes his whole life on this absurd, then his movement is by virtue of the absurd, and he is essentially deceived if the absurd he has chosen turns out not to be the absurd. If this absurd is Christianity, then he is a believing Christian. (*ibid.*, 558)

The specific absurd that Christianity refers to is the historical existence of Jesus as the God-man, 'the God in time' (*ibid.*, 561, 573). God is conceived by our understanding as a pure spiritual being that cannot be accorded any material

attributes that would turn it into a limited, finite being. 'That the by-nature eternal comes into existence in time, is born, grows up, and dies is a break with all thinking', Kierkegaard states (*ibid.*, 579). Christianity therefore assumes 'That Which Can Become Historical Only Against Its Nature, Consequently By Virtue Of The Absurd' (*ibid.*, 578).

This context too reminds us that faith is not a mere belief, but an assumption on which the religious person 'stakes his whole life' (as noted). It is a value-determination, positing an end for which a person is willing to renounce everything. Christian faith expresses the passionate striving for 'eternal happiness', happiness of an existing person in relation to God. In light of such striving, any immediate worldly happiness may be renounced – the person detaches himself from the world and gains freedom. Yet this is an endless striving, meaningful by itself and not by its realization (*ibid.*, 394f.).[27]

The pathos of this striving is essential to any genuine religious position. However, Christianity specifically bases an eternal happiness on the relation to a historical event – Jesus Christ. Thus, in Christianity, Jesus is conceived as the condition for eternal happiness; through him alone may a relation to God be established. From this perspective, persons unaware of the Gospel will not be redeemed. 'Only on this condition do I become blessed, and as I absolutely bind myself to it, I therefore exclude everyone else' (*ibid.*, 582). It follows that Christianity (like Judaism) 'is isolating, separating, is polemical' (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

Kierkegaard probably did not aim to propose a way of defending other religions, Judaism in particular. However, his concept of faith in the absurd may serve as justification for diverse religious forms of life: Leibowitz's position is an example. We have seen that Leibowitz's concept of Judaism presents the same form of faith in the absurd, only, the specific absurd it refers to is assuming that a relation to God must be established, exclusively, through halakhic practice. The Halakha forms a territory within the world of the finite and the temporary where the contact with the eternal should be made. For Leibowitz this particular territory, which forms the particularity of Judaism, is a gift from God, just as Jesus Christ was for Kierkegaard, and Isaac for Abraham. It is acknowledged as absurd, as Leibowitz still maintains a rational concept of God – 'to whom there is no analogy whatsoever' – and yet He is also 'the Giver of the Torah'. This single positive attribute of God is the object of faith, which determines halakhic practice as holy, as an absolute value before which all other considerations are annulled. As we previously observed, this is not a cognitive determination. On the contrary, the religious person admits lucidly that it is an absurd for the understanding. Precisely such acknowledgement of the absurd nourishes the pathos of the practitioner and forms his religious experience.

It certainly seems surprising (and quite ironic) to find a religious position that requires total submission of the individual to an objective system of duties to be an incarnation of the subjectivist standpoint of Kierkegaard, who fiercely challenged the established order of his own religion. However, we should not let appearances mislead us. Leibowitz clearly regarded the established order of Judaism as mainly consisting of halakhic practice not-*lishma* (not for its own sake), which he considered as 'poison' to the genuinely religious person (*Judaism*, 66). For this reason he has ceaselessly attacked the established order of Judaism, and remained a unique individual figure in the Jewish world. But even if he were an absolute conformist, I have demonstrated above that halakhic practice (*lishma*) in his terms is essentially conditioned by personal choice and subjectivity no less than Kierkegaard's faith.

A mirror image of this perplexity appears in Kierkegaard's thought. His battle against the objective doctrine of Christianity must not obscure our understanding that, as he says, 'everything I do is for the defence of the established; it is the only thing that can be done with truth' (*JFY*, 257).[28] Kierkegaard did not wish to abolish Christendom in the name of subjectivity, but 'to apply a corrective to the established order' (*ibid.*, 256). The reform he advanced was mainly that of the individual's relation to the established order. He did not consider 'the doctrine' as false to its roots in regard to true Christianity, since he did believe that it was practised properly in the beginning (*ibid.*, 129). Accordingly, I observed above that his existentialism does not express pure subjectivity but a paradoxical mutual conditioning of subjective and objective elements. This was observed in the context of his ethical conception, but it applies to his religious conception as well. To claim that Jesus (or the Gospel) is the condition for truth in Christianity implies an objective, historical element that makes any religious doctrine constructed on it 'exclusive' (to use his term). This – namely, the God in time – is a repulsive assumption from any philosophical ethical (universal) perspective, but precisely what Kierkegaard defends by means of his concept of the absurd.

In this way both Kierkegaard and Leibowitz could affirm and embrace their religious traditions and backgrounds, while taking into account modern philosophical criticism of religion. Their religious positions may be regarded as irrational, though not in the sense that they ignore or set aside rationality and reason. On the contrary, intellectual consciousness is the condition for this type of religiousness, for without it the absurd – which characterizes the object of faith and forms the relation between man and God – cannot be acknowledged. Only by understanding that we cannot understand intellectually the possibility of this relation in Judaism can we relate to a truly transcendent concept of God according to Leibowitz. Only by understanding that it goes against the understanding can a person relate to God through Christianity according Kierkegaard. 'The believing Christian both has and uses the understanding, [he] respects the universally human . . . he uses the understanding so much that through it he becomes aware

of the incomprehensible, and now, believing, he relates himself to it against the understanding' (*CUP*, 568).

References

BENBASSAT, ROI (2012) 'Kierkegaard's relation to Kantian ethics reconsidered', *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 49–74.

DAVENPORT, JOHN J. (2001) 'The meaning of Kierkegaard's choice between the aesthetic and the ethical: a response to MacIntyre', in John Davenport & Anthony Rudd (eds) *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre* (Peru IL: Carus Publishing), 75–112.

EVANS, C. STEPHEN (2012) 'Faith and reason in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*', in Rick Anthony Furtak (ed.) *Kierkegaard's 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript': A Critical Guide* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 204–218.

HARTMAN, DAVID (2003) 'Prayer and religious consciousness: an analysis of Jewish prayer in the works of Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Abraham Joshua Heschel', *Modern Judaism*, **23**, 105–125.

HARVI, ZEEV (2002) 'Leibowitz on the Abrahamic man, faith and nihilism' (in Hebrew), in M. Hallamish, H. Kasher, & Y. Silman (eds) *Abraham Avi Hamaminim* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press), 247–352.

KASHER, ASSA (1975) 'Paradox–question mark' (in Hebrew), *Iyyun*, **26**, 236–42.

KASHER, NAOMI (1977) 'Leibowitz's conception of Judaism compared to Kant's conception of morality' (in Hebrew), in A. Kasher & Y. Lewinger (eds) *Sefer Yeshayahu Leibowitz* (Tel-Aviv: Students Union of Tel-Aviv University), 21–34.

MARANTZ, HAIM (1997) 'Bearing witness: morality and religion in the thought of Yeshayahu Leibowitz', *Judaism*, **46**, 35–45.

MIRON, RONNY (2007) 'Yeshayahu Leibowitz on the possibility of religious subjectivity: critique and defense', in Anne Koch (ed.) *Watchtower Religionswissenschaft: Standortbestimmungen im wissenschaftlichen Feld* (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag), 95–118.

RUDD, ANTHONY (2001) 'Reason in ethics: MacIntyre and Kierkegaard', in John Davenport & Anthony Rudd (eds) *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre* (Peru IL: Carus Publishing), 131–150.

SAGI, AVI (1989) 'The test of the Aqueda – a comparative study in the thought of Leibowitz and Kierkegaard' (in Hebrew), *Daat*, **23**, 121–134.

(1997) 'Yeshayahu Leibowitz – a breakthrough in Jewish philosophy: religion without metaphysics', *Religious Studies*, **33**, 203–216.

SHASHAR, MICHAEL (2002) *Leibowitz – Heretic or Believer* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter).

SIGAD, RAN (1977) 'Leibowitz and Kierkegaard' (in Hebrew), in A. Kasher & Y. Lewinger (eds) *Sefer Yeshayahu Leibowitz* (Tel-Aviv: Students Union of Tel-Aviv University), 42–46.

SHAVID, ELIEZER (2007) 'Theocentricism and anthropocentrism: Leibowitz's relation to humanism' (in Hebrew), in A. Ravitzki (ed.) *Between Conservatism and Radicalism* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakibutz Hameuhad), 15–28.

SILMAN, YOCHANAN (1977) 'Kantian motives in Leibowitz's thought' (in Hebrew), in A. Kasher & Y. Lewinger (eds) *Sefer Yeshayahu Leibowitz* (Tel-Aviv: Students Union of Tel-Aviv University), 47–55.

STATMAN, DANIEL (1995) 'Leibowitz's concept of morals' (in Hebrew), in A. Sagi (ed.) *Olamo Vehaguto shel Yeshayahu Leibowitz* (Jerusalem: Keter), 326–343.

Notes

1. In this article I refer mainly to Leibowitz's texts translated into English published in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, E. Goldman (ed.), E. Goldman, Y. Navon, Z. Jacobson, G. Levi and R. Levy (trs) (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Other references are to the original texts in Hebrew, from which quotations are my translations. The following abbreviations are used:

   Emuna   *Emuna* ['Faith', in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Academon, 2002)
   Judaism   *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*
   Olam   *Yeshayahu Leibowitz al Olam umloo* [On the world and its content (Conversations with Michael Shashar)', in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1987)

    SEP   *Sihot al Emuna ve Philosophia* ['Conversations on faith and philosophy with Aviezer Ravitzki', in Hebrew] (2005) (radio broadcast, special publishing of http://www.leibowitz.co.il)

    Sihot   *Sihot al Mada ve Arachim* ['Conversations on science and values', in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Misrad Habitahon, 1985)

    'Tguvot'   'Tguvot' ['Replies', in Hebrew], *Iyyun*, **26** (1975), 278–281

    Yahadut   *Yahadut, Am Yhehudi u Medinat Isarel* ['Judaism', in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2005)

2. See also Statman (1995), 326–342, observing that Leibowitz's moral thought is Kantian, and Silman (1977).

3. For an account of the relation between religion and morality in Leibowitz's thought see Marantz (1997).

4. Leibowitz said of Kierkegaard that 'his worship of God conceals the psychosomatic stomach aches he had when his girl left him . . . this had brought on him a certain mental crisis, which he wrapped with a religious-faithful wrapping' (*SEP*, 89).

5. This view led certain Jewish thinkers to regard Leibowitz as 'an observant heretic' (Shashar (2002), 15).

6. 'For Judaism, faith is nothing but its system of Mitzvoth, which was the embodiment of Judaism' (*Judaism*, 38).

7. I refer to the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.
   The following abbreviations are used:

    CPR   *Critique of Pure Reason*, P. Guyer & A. W. Wood (tr. & ed.) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

    CprR   *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, M. J. Gregor (tr. & ed.) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 133–272

    G   *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, M. J. Gregor (tr. & ed.) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37–108

    REL   *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, A. W. Wood & G. D. Giovanni (tr. & ed.) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39–215

8. Leibowitz cites Rabbi Akiva on this matter: 'with all of your heart, all of your soul and all of your possessions, even if He takes your soul' (*Emuna*, 13).

9. The second part of the citation is a quotation from Maimonides.

10. ' "Holy" is an attribute that applies exclusively to God' (*Judaism*, 86). For a detailed review of this view see *ibid.*, 79–88, 214–220.

11. Leibowitz's interpretation of the commandment 'you shall love God' is reminiscent of Kant's practical interpretation of it (*REL*, 182).

12. On this basis Kant seems to have more reason in claiming that moral duties are God's commandments, as reason presents eternal laws whose validity is not derived from anything spatial-temporal.

13. Leibowitz also criticizes Hermann Cohen for following Kant on this point (*Judaism*, 355).

14. The choice of 'the good heart' is ultimately the determination of 'the highest good' as the superior end of human existence.

15. 'I know not even a single human activity that does not express a free determination of man's will', Leibowitz says in a filmed conversation with Prof. M. Halbertal, http://www.flix.co.il/tapuz/showVideo.asp?m=1268103, 30:26 (in Hebrew). This recalls Sartre's view.

16. This is a paradox that Kant naturally could not accept. Indeed, it would have destroyed the whole construction of his ethical theory, founded on the power of reason to grant practical imperatives absolute validity.

17. On 'choice' in Kierkegaard see especially the chapter 'The balance between the esthetic and the ethical' in *EO*2, 157-333; for its non-communicability see *CUP*, 72-80 (cf. *Judaism*, 9: 'In this domain there is no possibility of communication'). I refer to the English translations in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong (tr.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979-1997). The following abbreviations are used:

    CUP   *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, I*

    *EO*2   *Either/Or, Part II*

    FT   *Fear and Trembling*

    JFY   *Judge for Yourself!*

18. For the debate on the nature of choice see Davenport (2001) and Rudd (2001) in reply to MacIntyre.

19. For an elaborate account of this issue and the debate around it see Benbassat (2012).

20. See Miron (2007, 96), criticizing Leibowitz: 'how can one's own subjectivity remain detached and uninfluenced by the demanding routine of the religious praxis, such as that of Judaism?'.
21. This is the *Ytgaber* (in Hebrew), which means 'shall overcome oneself'. See for example *Yahadut*, 355.
22. See also: 'Things that cannot be said, the religion of Mizvoth says. What is prayer? – prayer in itself and its meaning – is absurd' (*Yahadut*, 360).
23. For an elaborate account of prayer in Leibowitz's thought, see Hartman (2003).
24. Kierkegaard presents Socrates as the typical philosophical example for this (*CUP*, 503f.; *FT*, 69).
25. To be sure, I understand 'the absurd' as indicating something of which existence necessarily involves a logical contradiction, specifically the assumption of God in time. Consequently, and unlike certain interpretations, I hold Kierkegaard's category of faith to be a non-philosophical irrationalist position. For the counter-opinion see especially Evans (2012) and his earlier works. I do not find his objections strong enough to refute the evidences in Kierkegaard's writings (few of them are presented in the following paragraphs). However, I do think that the term 'irrationalist' needs refinement, as proposed by the end of this article. It is impossible, though, to give here an appropriate account of the issue.
26. It may be claimed that Kierkegaard changed his notion of Christianity after the *Postscript* or, since it is a pseudonymous work, never really held it. However, I do not think so, because, first, 'the absurd' of Christianity is still maintained later by other expressions such as 'the sign of contradiction' (*JFY*, 121) and the 'offence to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks' (*ibid.*, 201), and, second it seems unlikely that 'the God in time' suddenly made sense for the understanding in Kierkegaard's eyes, without him admitting such a radical shift in his thinking.
27. Both Kierkegaard and Leibowitz express gratitude to Lessing (1729-1781) for stressing this point (*CUP*, 106-125; *Judaism*, 28).
28. This quotation and the one that follows are from entries of Kierkegaard's journals and papers brought together in the supplement to *Judge for Yourself!*.