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RATIONALISM, EMPIRICISM, AND RELIGION

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Does G-d want believers, or rather empiricists?

A signature fallacy of contemporary thinking is the conflation of rationalism and empiricism, often under the banner of science. Rationalism and empiricism are actually radically opposed epistemologies.

Empiricism holds that truth-claims can only be verified through experience, preferably repeated experience; anything we experience – whether or not it makes sense to us - actually happened (or: is fact), and anything we don't experience – no matter how much sense it makes to us - cannot be known to have happened. Rationalism, by contrast, holds that truth-claims can be verified through thought; things that make inevitable sense can be said to happen even if we don't experience them, and experiences that don't make sense are illusions or delusions.

The signature fallacy of empiricism is "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" (afterward, therefore because of). It cannot distinguish between "constant conjunction" and "causality." It cannot distinguish between coincidence and connection, and is vulnerable to statistical flukes and unable to penetrate complex interrelationships.

The signature failing of rationalism is hubris, the assumption that the human brain – individual or social– is capable of knowing which potential causal mechanisms are possible and which are not. Who would have thought that microbes could cause illness in macroscopic creatures, or that flicking a switch could loose an invisible stream of energy that could heat a filament to glowing and so light a room?

Science at its best balances rationalism with empiricism – it gives more weight to experiences that accord with intuitively compelling causal mechanisms, but refuses to reject consistently repeated experiences even if they make no sense. It looks to confirm intuitively compelling (elegant) theories, but is willing to treat inelegant theories

as true so long as they accord better with the available empirical data.

What about religion, and Judaism in particular?

My context is Shemot 15:22-26, the Marah episode.

The narrative begins with the Jews leaving the Reed Sea and traveling for three days in the wilderness without finding water, but apparently also without complaining. They arrive at Marah, where there is water, but the water is not potable because "bitter" – and now the complaints start. Mosheh turns immediately to G-d; G-d directs him to a tree; he (He?) tosses the tree toward the water; the water is "sweetened" (or: they "sweetened" the waters).

At this point – in the middle of verse 25 - the time-sequence becomes confused, and we are enmeshed in a thicket of pronouns with ambiguous antecedents. The narrator tells us that "there he (He?) put to them (שם שם = *sham sam*) a *chok* and a *mishpat*, and there he (He? they?) tested him (Him? them?)." When? Before the waters were sweetened, or after? Furthermore, the *chok* and *mishpat* are never identified, and we are not told the outcome of the test.

Finally, someone (Mosheh? Hashem?) makes a statement: "If you surely heed the voice of Hashem our G-d, and you do what is straight in His eyes, and you hearken to His *mitzvot*, and you observe all His *chukim*– (then) all the illnesses which I have put (שמתי) in Egypt I will not put (אשים) on you, because I am Hashem your healer." It is not made explicit whether or how this statement relates to either the sweetening of the water or the *chok*, *mishpat*, and test. However, the language of the statement incorporated both the verb אשם and the term *chok*.

The earliest interpretive traditions we have wonder how G-d can describe Himself as our healer if He will never

make us ill. Their solution is that preventive medicine is healing-in-advance, and that the verse should not be understood as a promise-of-reward - “if you do what is straight etc. then I will not place the illnesses etc.” – but rather as a natural consequence – “if you do what is straight etc., then you will not become ill.”

But how can obedience to Divine commandments yield health? Here the Derashot HaRan (Derashah #6) offers a reading that connects all three elements of the episode, as follows: The tree – let us assume that it was a tree that by nature would add bitterness to water – sweetened the water solely because Mosheh tossed it there *in fulfillment* of a Divine *chok*. G-d then commands additional *chukim*, which He can do effectively because He has already demonstrated their effectiveness – by sweetening the water, his *chok* passed the test! He can therefore plausibly tell the Jews that obeying all his *chukim* will have the physical effect of preventing illness. In other words, He empirically demonstrated a causal relationship between commandedness and effectiveness in a specific case (empiricism), and then asked that we recognize this as an intuitively compelling general relationship (rationalism).

Derashot HaRan presents G-d as acknowledging and perhaps even endorsing empiricism – the Jews would not, and likely should not, accept commandments which seem purposeless, but they should accept the results of His experiment as proof that His commandments are purposeful, even if the methods by which they achieve their purposes are inscrutable.

Rabbeinu Bechayay (Commentary to Shemot) goes further. He asserts that the distinction between *chukim* and *mishpatim* popularized by Rashi, that *chukim* are rationally incomprehensible while *mishpatim* are rationally comprehensible, applies as well to medicine, and *chok* and *mishpat* here refer to cures rather than commandments. G-d taught Mosheh at Marah both natural and “magical” (*segulah*) cures; the Jews correctly would have accepted only the natural had the effectiveness of the “magical” not been experimentally demonstrated by the tree’s capacity to sweeten water. The tree’s effectiveness is not a function of the Divine command to use it; rather, G-d commanded Mosheh to use this tree because it would work, albeit not via a physically explicable causal mechanism.

Here I think Rabbeinu Bechayay diverges from Rambam. Rambam held that apparent *segulah* cures whose

effectiveness had been experimentally demonstrated were not violations of *darkei emori* because the fact that they were effective demonstrated that they were not magical at all – he does not allow for the possibility of effective magic. The question is whether the issue between Rabbeinu Bechaya and Rambam is more than semantic, i.e. whether Rambam simply calls parapsychical causality natural when it works, or whether he assumes physical causality even where its basis is unknown. My sense is the latter.

Where they agree, however, is that G-d set out to give the Jews an experience that would let them make an empiricist case for the effectiveness of religion, rather than simply asking them to believe it, or asking them to practice it regardless of its effectiveness.

Now this likely sets up a future epistemological crisis: What are Jews to do if they – to the best of their knowledge – are keeping the commandments, and yet they keep falling ill? Should they – as good empiricists – assume that the connection between commandment-observance and health is false (and therefore reinterpret the Torah so that it no longer claims that this connection is factually true), or rather – as good rationalists – should they assume that they have not in fact kept the commandments (or that they are not in fact ill)?

My tentative argument here is that the experiment of the tree teaches us that G-d wants us to question our religious paradigms when they don’t seem borne out by the empirical evidence. This does not mean that we should reject them when they don’t seem to be borne out – but we should consider the possibility that we have misunderstood.

Some concrete examples I have in mind are the propositions that ritual observance generates ethical improvement and that insulating a community from external influence improves its ethical sensibility. Do these match our experience? If not, should we assume that the propositions are false (and were falsely attributed to the tradition), or rather that we are misevaluating levels of observance, or degrees of insulation?

What causal propositions about religion does Modern Orthodoxy in particular assert, and how well do they conform to empirical experience?

Shabbat shalom!

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