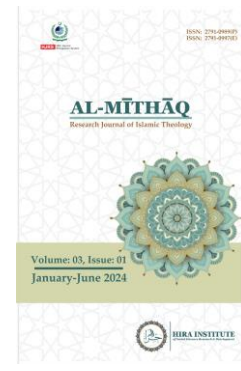




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Rethinking the Human-Being in a Broken World and the Role of Religion: Heschel's Search for Meaning

1. Hussain Ahmad Khan

ahmad.hussain1879@gmail.com

M.Phil. Scholar,

Department of Hadith and Seerat,

The Islamia University of Bahawalpur.

2. Sadaam Hakeem

sadaamhafiz313@gmail.com

BS. Scholar,

Department of Sociology,

University of the Punjab, Lahore.

3. Zunnurain Sarwar

rzunnuran@gmail.com

Lecturer,

Government Degree College, Sadiq Abad.

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Rethinking the Human-Being in a Broken World and the Role of Religion: Heschel's Search for Meaning

1. Hussain Ahmad Khan

M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Hadith and Seerat, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur.
ahmad.hussain1879@gmail.com

2. Sadaam Hakeem

BS. Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of the Punjab, Lahore.
sadaamhafiz313@gmail.com

3. Zunnurain Sarwar

Lecturer, Government Degree College, Sadiq Abad.
rzunnuran@gmail.com

Abstract:

Our attitude towards the human essence is a milestone in its ultimate meaning in our consciousness. Although it is a subject of philosophy due to its linguistic expression, it essentially has a transcendental nature. Being human necessarily implies its meaning, because man is not just an abstract being or just existence, but rather its reason is that he is a creation, therefore naturally carries meaning. This profound question of meaning, rooted in our very creation, finds a unique lens in the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish theologian deeply invested in Maimonidean thought. For Heschel, religion forms the bedrock of self-awareness, and in the wake of profound tragedies like Hiroshima and the emergence of Auschwitz in the heart of Europe, traditional philosophy falls short. We must instead, Heschel argues, forge a new understanding of the human-divine relationship, prioritizing interfaith dialogue above rigid doctrines. Through this reinterpretation, he elevates Jewish teachings beyond their specific traditions, envisioning them as a universal window to perceive God, not as the deity of a single people, but as the God of all beings. This article delves into this critical role of religion in shaping human meaning in the contemporary world, drawing upon Heschel's theological and philosophical insights as outlined in Chapter Four of his seminal work, "Who is Man?".

Keywords: *Human Being, Meaning, Interfaith Dialogue, Broken World.*

Introduction

Human is a subject that was discussed under special meanings during the Enlightenment era, which gave birth to a new zeitgeist. Zeitgeist is composed of three domains, namely what am I, which is studied as human nature or the meaning of being human; what is this world, which can be called the worldview, and what is reality, which is discussed in the context of God or the divine, or the absence of any. The relationship between human and the universe is discussed in the context of the concept of reality, and both subjects acquire meaning with the idea of reality. However, this is the methodology of the traditional scholars. During the Enlightenment era, the concept of human was given a central place, and the worldview or the metaphysics became anthropocentric. Thus, as a result of this evolution in the time/space construct of the knowledge, the zeitgeist became adorned with a new attire.

Heschel's Perspective on Human Existence and the Role of Religion

Religious beliefs that rely on the unseen agree that the meanings of human existence are formed in relation to the concept of reality, meaning that the source and origin of meanings is the concept of reality, and the concept of reality provides its components. If the concept of reality is somehow obscured or another aspect like the anthropocentric worldview dominates, the concept of reality becomes meaningless, and the meaning of being human are dissolved. Since religion, due to its divine inspiration, renders this abstract triangle (human-universe-divine) into pragmatic and living truth, therefore, every past civilization manifested as a religious civilization in its complete sense.

After the Enlightenment movement, the question of meaning took on a new dimension with the change in the zeitgeist. It gave humanity a new standard and provided a new framework and new incentives for human consciousness regarding reality and the world. It is known that meaning is essentially a relationship between the concept of reality and the idea about human. It is essential whether it is accepted or rejected. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes:

He may be creative or destructive; he cannot live without it [meaning]. Human Being is either coming into meaning or betraying it. The concern of meaning, the gist of all creative efforts, is not self-imposed; it is the necessity of his being.¹

This means that meaning is such an essential aspect of existence that it encompasses its highs and lows, the horizons and the verticals from beginning to end. In light of Abraham Joshua Heschel's ideas, this article discusses the meaning of human existence in the modern zeitgeist and Weltanschauung.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (January 11, 1907 – December 23, 1972) emerged as a notable figure in 20th-century Jewish theology, mysticism, and philosophy. Born in Warsaw in 1907, Heschel, the youngest of six children, hailed from a lineage of distinguished European rabbis, including Rebbe Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt. Following the death of his father at the age of nine, Heschel's intellectual journey commenced under the guidance of a Gerrer Hasid, exposing him to the teachings of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk.²

Embarking on a scholarly pursuit, Heschel obtained his doctorate at the University of Berlin and received rabbinic ordination at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. In Berlin, he studied under eminent scholars such as Hanoah Albeck, Ismar Elbogen, and Leo Baeck, concurrently engaging in teaching Talmud at the Hochschul.³ However, his academic journey faced disruptions with the onset of challenges and exile. Arrested by the Gestapo in 1938, Heschel endured deportation to Poland during the Polenaktion. Despite adversity, he spent ten months lecturing on Jewish philosophy and Torah at Warsaw's Institute for Jewish Studies. His escape to London, facilitated by colleagues, occurred just before the German invasion of Poland. Tragically, Heschel's mother and two sisters perished in Nazi concentration camps.

Philosophically, Heschel's contributions were nuanced, bridging ancient and modern perspectives. Rejecting Karl Moses Mendelssohn's reformist approach, he simultaneously challenged the inflexibility of conventional Jewish religious thinking. Heschel delved into the spiritual dimensions of humanity within a world shaped by humanism, juxtaposing ancient wisdom with contemporary reflections on existence.

Beyond academia, Heschel's legacy extended into social activism. Actively involved in the U.S. civil rights movement, he drew inspiration from Hebrew prophets, advocating for social justice and opposing the Vietnam War.⁴

Heschel grappled with the challenges of the First World War and the times of Auschwitz. He observed the disintegrating world through the lens of ethics and meaning. While keeping in mind the ancient Jewish worldview, he diverged from the contemporary religious expressions of the era after the advent of modernity. On one hand, he rejected the reformist approach advocated by Karl Moses Mendelssohn. On the other hand, he critically examined the traditional Jewish religious thought, which tends to be stagnant. Heschel explored the concept of being human in the world by humanistic ideology, juxtaposing it with the ancient prisms of knowledge.

It is known that the question of existence has been a focal point of human knowledge since ancient times. In the modern era, thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and proponents of Existentialism have engaged in discussions on this topic. However, Abraham Heschel approached it with a fresh perspective. He writes:

Human Being is never sheer being; it is always involved in meaning. The dimension of meaning is indigenous to his being human, just as the dimension of space is intrinsic to stars and stones.⁵

In other words, it is not merely existence but the bearing of meaning that defines human existence. This inherent connection between meaning and existence is akin to how a piece of rock holds the property of acquiring space without the need for theoretical contemplation—it is an integral part of our consciousness. Heschel's thought challenges the conventional view of human existence within the framework of Existentialism, which often portrays human as nameless, faceless, and insensate entity, thus linking them to a lifeless transcendence.

Along with it, it has been a prevailing notion that the most crucial question in this regard is: What is existence? However, Heschel diverges from this perspective, elevating the issue of meaning to a higher status. He writes:

To the mind exposed to the reality that confronts us, the paramount problem is existence. Yet, to the mind attuned to the intimate human situation, the excruciating, heart-rending problem is meaning. It is upon the intuition or affirmation of meaning that the sense of significant being—the sign of mental health—depends.⁶

The modern mind, claiming to be the seeker of truth, considers existence to be the ultimate truth and considers the question of existence to be the goal of human thought. However, the more important question should be one that relates existence to our life and consciousness, and that is the meaningfulness of existence. Therefore, the ultimate goal of human thought should be to discuss meaning instead of existence. In other words, it is not mere existence, but the meaningfulness of existence that truly matters. While conventional thought often fixates on the essence of being, Heschel shifts the focus to the realm of significance. For him, life transcends mere existence; it embodies a unique way of living. He contends that being human surpasses mere existence, and therefore, “to live” holds greater value than “to be.” According to Heschel, “to live” signifies the ultimate expression of worth, as it inherently connects us to others and completes our essential core. Joshua Herschel addresses this matter as follows:

The Dilemma faced by the living man is whether the ultimate transcendence is alive or not alive. Making the option for the ultimacy of being as being, the status of man as a living being becomes precarious.⁷

In other words, the connection of a human being is with the transcendent and living being. It is through the virtue of this connection that existence acquires its meaning. From this perspective, we deduce that the fundamental issue is not existence itself, but rather the meaning of existence. This is why Heschel's stance is that the ultimate solution to the human predicament lies in the context of one's relationship with God⁸. Furthermore, the depth of meaning requires transcendence from personal self-existence. Human nature seeks a meaning that cannot be self-referenced. He says:

What we are in search of is not meaning for me, an idea to satisfy me my conscience, but rather a meaning transcending me, ultimate relevance of human being.⁹

Meaning should not be such that it merely defines one's self in isolation, or only fulfils things like mental regurgitation, but human's ultimate meaning is hidden in his rising above himself. Because the human self is in search of a meaning that it cannot provide for itself.¹⁰ If the essence of meaning itself cannot be contemplated in the search for meaning, then the discussion will remain incomplete. Heschel says in this regard:

Meaning denotes a condition that cannot be reduced to a material relation and grasped by the sense organs. Meaning is the compatibility with the preciously real; furthermore, that which a fact is for the sake of something else: the pregnancy of an object with value.¹¹

In other words, meaning is composed of two aspects in its essence. One is its compatibility with the "real", and the other is being the bearer of value and worth for the "other". In this way, life is reflected in its full meanings, because values such as duty, responsibility, loyalty, conscience, and sacrifice are born from this.

It is important to discuss the reason why talking about meaning is necessary in this world standing on the disintegration of meaning? Because without knowing it, it will be difficult for us to understand this world in front of us. Heschel discusses this matter in the form of a complete discourse. He writes in one place:

The imperative according to the logic of biology may be: "Eat, drink and be marry!" Yet a life essentially dedicated to the fulfilment of such an imperative result in depriving human being of all the qualities of human being.¹²

In other words, the source of humanness is actually the meaningful existence of man. A meaningful existence is a bearer of qualities; therefore, it becomes the vessel of values. If we become indifferent to the meaning of man, then the path of disintegration of humanness will be paved, which makes destruction our destiny.

Nietzsche writes:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism...For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end...¹³

In other words, nihilism is essentially the end of meaning, and indifference to meaning

inevitably attracts nihilism. The modern civilization has committed the same mistake of indifference to meaning, and it does so without any sense of shame or guilt. Heschel warns about this, writing:

What the world needs is a sense of embarrassment. Modern man has the power and wealth to overcome the poverty and disease, but he has no wisdom to suspicion. We are guilty of misunderstanding the meaning of existence. We are guilty of distorting our goals and misinterpreting our souls.¹⁴

This corruption has been committed in the modern world. Therefore, it is more important to consider our relationship with the universe keeping in mind the meaning, because the secret of being human is hidden in caring for meaning, and man can only face the truth, or in fact the ‘real,’ only in the company of meaning.

Conclusion

Therefore, in the face of a fragmented world teetering on the precipice of meaninglessness, we must urgently shift our focus from the sterile question of existence to the more vital inquiry of its significance. Heschel's message demands a bold reorientation our intellectual compass, away from the cold embrace of mere being and towards the vibrant aspect of meaningful living. In the play of human existence, it is not the act of "being" that resonates, but the complete progression of connection, transcendence, and purpose.

Heschel's discourse serves as a guide to understanding the profound implications of neglecting the pursuit of meaning. Indifference to the meaningful existence of man, as warned by Heschel, not only deprives us of essential qualities but also paves the path to the destructive destiny of nihilism.

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