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On Being Human
The Philosophical Anthropology of
Martin Buber & Rav Soloveitchik
Session One

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THIS COURSE IS DEDICATED IN MEMORY OF:

אסתר חנה ז'ל בת צבי ופרומה עלקא פייגא בת מאיר ופשא לאה ז'ל נח בן אברהם ופייגא ז'ל
MAY THEIR SOULS BE BOUND IN THE EVERLASTING BOND OF LIFE תהא נשמתם צרוות בצרור החיים

Institute for Jewish Continuity
 “On Being Human”
 Spring 2013
 Session One

I. Martin Buber’s Philosophical Anthropology

A. Aims and Focus

1. ...man’s special place in the cosmos, his connexion with destiny, his relation to the world of things, his understanding of his fellowmen, his existence as a being that knows it must die, his attitude in the ordinary and extraordinary encounters with the mystery with which his life is shot through. (*Between Man and Man*, ‘What Is Man?’ p. 142)

2. But philosophy succeeds in rendering me such help in its individual disciplines precisely through each of these disciplines not reflecting, and not being able to reflect, on the wholeness of man. Either a philosophical discipline shuts out man in his complex wholeness and considers him only as a bit of nature, as cosmology does; or (as all the other disciplines do) it tears off its own special sphere from the wholeness of man, delimits it from the other spheres, establishes its own basic principles and develops its own methods. In addition it has to remain open and accessible, first to the ideas of metaphysics itself as the doctrine of being, of what is and of existence, secondly to the findings of the philosophical branch disciplines, and thirdly to the discoveries of philosophical anthropology. But least of all may it make itself dependent on the latter; for in every one of those disciplines the possibility of its achieving anything in thought rests precisely on its objectification, on what may be termed its "de-humanization" (Ibid., 145)

3. The depth of the anthropological question is first touched when we also recognize as specifically human that which is not reason. Man is not a centaur, he is man through and through. He can be understood only when one knows, on the one hand, that there is something in all that is human, including thought, which belongs to the general nature of living creatures, and is to be grasped from this nature, while knowing, on the other hand, that there is no human quality which belongs fully to the general nature of living creatures and is to be grasped exclusively from it. Even man’s hunger is not an animal’s hunger. Human reason is to be understood only in connexion with human non-reason. The problem of philosophical anthropology is the problem of a specific totality and of its specific structure. (Ibid., p. 189-90)

B. Distance and Relation

1. ...the principle of human life is not simple but twofold, being built up in a twofold movement which is of such kind that the one movement is the presupposition of the other. I propose to call the first movement ‘the primal setting at a distance’ and the second ‘entering into relation’. That the first movement is the presupposition of the other is plain from the fact that one can enter into relation only with being which has been set at a distance, more precisely, has become an independent opposite. And it is only for man that an independent opposite exists (The Knowledge of Man, 50).

2. Only the view of what is over against me in the world in its full presence, with which I have set myself, present in my whole person, in relation -- only this view gives me the world truly as whole and one (Ibid., 53)

3. Only man, as man, gives distance to things which he comes up on his realm; he sets them in their independence as things from which now on continue to exist ready for a function and which he can make wait for him so that on each occasion he may master them again, and bring them into action (Ibid., 55)

4. The basis of man's life with man is twofold, and it is one -- the wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become, by men; and the innate capacity in man to confirm his fellow men in this way. That this capacity lies so immeasurably fallow constitutes the real weakness and questionableness of the human race: actual humanity exists only where this capacity unfolds. On the other hand, of course, an empty claim for confirmation, without devotion for being and becoming, mars the truth of the life between man and man (Ibid., 57-58)

II. Rav Soloveitchik

A. Aims and Focus

1. As you know my interest, at present, lies in the field of religious anthropology, the doctrine of man, within the philosophical perspective of Judaism. It is virgin land. Nothing has been written about the most central problems of human existence, fate and destiny. I am firmly convinced that research in this field would be a rewarding and enriching experience (from letter to Rabbi Leonard Rosenfeld, head of Jewish Education Committee of New York, 1958).

B. Competing Views of the Human Being

2. *The Biblical and Classical Greek view of Man:*

The world of man is incongruous with that of the animal and plant... Man is finite and corporeal, yet different; he is not a particular kind of animal. He is rather a singular being... For the Bible, the mystical image of the transcendent G-d...[for Greek antiquity] the metaphysics of the nous and the logos... serve as the ground of man's essential autonomy and his "incommensurability" with other living beings... (*The Emergence of Ethical Man*, 3-4)

3. *The modern scientific view of man*

...spurns the idea of human autonomy as mythical and unfounded and denies the ontic discrepancy between man and animal-plant. The unity and continuity of organic life is looked upon as an indispensable postulate of all chemical sciences. Man, animal and plant are all placed in the realm of matter, organized in living structures and patterns (Ibid., 4)

4. I wish to emphasize that the widespread opinion that within the perspective of anthropological naturalism there is no place for the religious act, for the relatedness of man to eternity and infinity is wrong... Our task now is to investigate the cogency of the almost dogmatic assertion that the Bible proclaimed the separateness of man from his nature and his otherness... The sooner Biblical texts are placed in their proper setting—namely, the Oral Tradition with its almost endless religious awareness—

the clearer and more certain I am that Judaism does not accent unreservedly the theory of man's isolationism and separatism within the natural order of things (*Ibid.*, 5-6).

C. The Judaic View

5. The Hebrew Bible is cognizant of man as a natural being found on the same plane as the animal and the plant. Indeed, such an idea is a motivating force in Jewish ethics and metaphysics.

6. ...transcendence was always seen against the backdrop of naturalness. The canvas was man's immanence; transcendence was just projected on it as a display of colors. It was more a modifying than a basic attribute of man. Both ideas were considered inseparable by the Bible; Christianity succeeded in isolating them and reducing the element of naturalness to a state of corruption and encountering the transcendent being with an alternative: death or life... (*Ibid.*, 9)

7. While the background of man's existence is his involvement in the natural biological occurrence, his vistas are almost endless. His origin is the earth...his destiny, destination, and goal are placed in the sublime heights of a transcendental world. Man is a simple creature ontically, but a very complicated one ethically (*Ibid.*, 13).

8. Concerning his entire physiologico-biological functioning system... man does not differ from the plant. The same automatic [non-self-conscious] functionalism, which operates within man and regulates his response to the outside, prevails in plant. In this regard, man is not to be found one degree above the physiological operation of the plant. We are not cognizant of the functions of our body and there is no possibility that man will ever become directly conscious of that physiological performance. There is no act on the part of man concerning those inner-outer functions, which are inherent in the plant (*Ibid.*, 16)

9. When the prophets spoke of man, one of their most favored metaphors was the tree. The Torah already associated man with the tree: "for is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you?" (Deut. 20:19)... Human beings are at war, but not trees; therefore there is no reason why you should besiege the innocent tree and destroy it (*Ibid.*, 24)

10. The plant is described by Torah as having [the qualities of] growth, reproduction, and group identity (*Ibid.*, 25-26)

11. ...Halakhah, in formulating the idea of man, was... guided by the idea of man as an *organism* that displays a certain drive, though elemental and unconscious, toward existence in communion with the outside. It sounds bizarre, yet the Halakhah saw in the budding of organic life the outline of a personality, endowed with many personalistic attributes (*Ibid.*, 29)