



HANS JONAS



**PHILOSOPHICAL
ESSAYS**

**From Ancient Creed
To Technological Man**

PRENTICE-HALL, INC., *Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey*

8. Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective

The crisis of modern man—at least one aspect of it—can be put in these terms. Reason triumphant through science has destroyed the faith in revelation, without, however, replacing revelation in the office of guiding our ultimate choices. Reason disqualified *itself* from that office, in which once it vied with religion, precisely when it installed itself, in the form of science, as sole authority in matters of truth. Its abdication in that native province is the corollary of its triumph in other spheres: its success there is predicated upon that redefinition of the possible objects and methods of knowledge that leaves whole ranges of other objects outside its domain. This situation is reflected in the failure of contemporary philosophy to offer an ethical theory, i.e., to validate ethical norms as part of our universe of knowledge.

How are we to explain this vacuum? What, with so different a past, has caused the great Nothing with which philosophy today responds to one of its oldest questions—the question of how we ought to live? Only the fact that philosophy, once the queen of the sciences, has become a camp follower of Science, made the situation possible; and contemporary religions (it would be too flattering to grace them with the name of theologies) are anxious not to fall too far behind among the stragglers. How this concerns ethics and its present condition has to be articulated.

Reprinted, with minor modifications, from the *Central Conference American Rabbis Journal*, January 1968.

Three interrelated determinants of modern thought have a share in the nihilistic situation, or less dramatically put, in the contemporary impasse of ethical theory—two of them theoretical and the third practical: the modern concept of nature, the modern concept of man, and the fact of modern technology supported by both. All three imply the negation of certain fundamental tenets of the philosophical as well as the religious tradition. Since we are here concerned with gaining a Jewish perspective on the situation, we shall note in particular the biblical propositions that are intrinsically disavowed in those three elements of the modern mind.

I

1. First, then, we have the modern, i.e. scientific, concept of *nature*, which by implication denies a number of things formerly held, and first of these is *creation*, that is, the first sentence of the Bible "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." To say of the world that it is created is to say that it is not its own ground but proceeds from a will and plan beyond itself—in whatever form one conceptualizes the dependence on such a transcendent "cause." In the view of modern science, by contrast, the world has "made" and is continuously making "itself." It is an ongoing process, activated by the forces at work within it, determined by the laws inherent in its matter, each state of it the effect of its own past and none the implementation of a plan or intended order. The world at every moment is the last word about itself and measured by nothing but itself.

2. By the same token, this scientific philosophy denies the further sentence "And God saw everything which He had made, and, behold, it was very good." Not that physics holds that the world is bad or evil, that is, in any sense the opposite of good: the world of modern physics is neither "good" nor "bad," it has no reference to either attribute, because it is *indifferent* to that very distinction. It is a world of fact alien to value. Thus such terms as "good" or "bad," "perfect" or "imperfect," "noble" or "base," do not apply to anything in or of nature. They are human measures entirely.

3. A third negation then follows. A nature pronounced "good" by its creator in turn proclaims the goodness of the maker and master. "The heavens tell the glory of God and the firmament proclaims His handiwork" (Psalm 19). That is to say, the glory of God, visible in His works, calls forth in man admiration and piety. The modern heavens no longer tell the glory of God. If anything, they proclaim their own mute, mindless, swirling immensity; and what they inspire is not admiration, but dizziness; not piety, but the rejoinder of analysis.

4. The disenchanting world is a purposeless world. The absence of values from nature means also the absence of goals or ends from it. We said that the noncreated world makes itself blindly and not according to any intention. We must now add that this renders the whole status of intentions and ends in the scheme of things problematical and leaves man as the sole repository of them. How is he qualified for this solitary role, for this ultimate monopoly on intention and goal?

II

With this question we turn to the second theme, from the modern doctrine of nature to the modern doctrine of man, where again we shall look for the negations of biblical views implied in the affirmations of modern theory. We easily discover such negations in the ideas of evolution, of history, and of psychology as they appear in the forms of Darwinism, historicism, and psychoanalysis—three representative aspects of the contemporary concept of man.

1. The cardinal biblical statement on the nature of man, let us remember, is contained in the second great pronouncement of the creation story after that of the creation of the universe—the statement, made with particular solemnity, that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.” This sentence is the second cornerstone of Jewish doctrine, no less important than the first supplied by the all-inclusive, opening sentence of the Bible. And just as the first, concerning nature as a whole, is denied by the modern doctrine of nature, so the second, concerning man, is denied by the naturalistic doctrine of evolution as it applies to the human species.

In the Darwinian view, man bears no eternal “image” but is part of universal, and in particular of biological, “becoming.” His “being” as it actually turned out is the unintended (and variable) product of unconcerned forces whose prolonged interplay with circumstances have “evolution” for their joint effect but nothing (not even evolution as such) for their aim. None of the forms arising in the process has any validity other than the factuality of its having “made the grade”; none is terminal either in meaning or in fact. Man, therefore, does not embody an abiding or transcendent “image” by which to mold himself. As the temporal (and possibly temporary) outcome of the chance transactions of the evolutionary mechanics, with the survival premium the only selective principle, his being is legitimized by no valid essence. He is an accident, sanctioned merely by success. Darwinism, in other words, offers an “image-less” image of man. But, it was the image-idea with its transcendent reference by whose logic it could be said “Be ye holy for I

am holy, the Lord your God." The evolutionary imperative sounds distinctly different: Be successful in the struggle of life. And since biological success is, in Darwinian terms, defined by the mere rate of reproduction, one may say that all imperatives are reduced to "Be fruitful and multiply."

2. Evolution, however, only provides the natural backdrop for another and uniquely human dimension of becoming, *history*; and the modern concept of man is as much determined by historicism as by Darwinism. Here again it clashes with biblical lore. As Darwinism finds man to be a product of nature and its accidents, so historicism finds him to be the continuous product of his own history and its man-made creations, i.e., of the different and changing cultures, each of which generates and imposes its own *values*—as matters of fact, not of truth: as something whose force consists in the actual hold it has on those who happen to be born into the community in question, not in a claim to ideal validity which might be judged objectively. There *are* only matters of fact for the positivist creed of which historicism is one form. And, as facts are mutable, so are values; and as historical configurations of fact, i.e., cultures are many, so are value-systems, i.e., moralities. There is no appeal from the stream of fact to a court of truth.

This historical relativism-and-pluralism obviously negates the biblical tenet of *one* Torah, its transcendent authority, and its being knowable. "He has told you, O man, what is good": this means that there is one valid good for man, and that its knowledge is granted him—be it through revelation, be it through reason. This is now denied. Relativism—cultural, anthropological, historical—is the order of the day, ousting and replacing any absolutism of former times. Instead of the absolute, there is only the relative in ethics; instead of the universal, only the socially particular; instead of the objective, only the subjective; and instead of the unconditional, only the conditional, conventional, and convenient.

3. The finishing touch on all this is put by modern *psychology*—after evolutionism and historicism the third among the forces shaping the modern concept of man which we have chosen to consider. The psychological argument—because it seems to put the matter to the test of everyone's own verification—has proved to be the most effective way of cutting man down to size and stripping him in his own eyes of every vestige of metaphysical dignity. There has been underway in the West, at the latest since Nietzsche's depth-probing into the genealogy of morals, a persistent "unmasking" of man: the exposure of his "higher" aspects as some kind of sham, a "front" and roundabout way of gratification for the most elementary, essentially base drives, out of which the

complex, sophisticated psychic system of civilized man is ultimately constructed and by whose energies alone it is moved. The popular success of psychoanalysis, which gave this picture the trappings of a scientific theory, has established it as the most widely accepted view of man's psychical life and thus of the very essence of man. True or not, it has become the common currency of our everyday psychologizing: the higher in man is a disguised form of the lower.

This psychological doctrine denies the authenticity of the spirit, the transcendent accountability of the person. The moral imperative is not the voice of God or the Absolute, but of the superego which speaks with spurious authority—spurious because dissembling its own questionable origin—and this speaker can be put in his place by *reminding* him of his origin. Note here the reversed meaning which the "reminder of origin" takes on with the reversal of origin itself: it is now forever looked for in the depth, where formerly it was sought in the height. The reductionism, borrowed from natural science, that governs the theory of man, results in the final debunking of man, leaving him in the engulfing miserableness which Christian doctrine had attributed to him as a consequence of the Fall, but now no longer opposed by the "image" to which he might rise again.

Now the paradox of the modern condition is that this reduction of man's stature, the utter humbling of his metaphysical pride, goes hand in hand with his promotion to quasi-God-like privilege and power. The emphasis is on *power*. For it is not only that he now holds the monopoly on value in a world barren of values; that as the sole source of meaning he finds himself the sovereign author and judge of his own preferences with no heed to an eternal order: this would be a somewhat abstract privilege if he were still severely hemmed in by necessity. It is the tremendous *power* which modern *technology* puts into his hands to implement that license, a power therefore which has to be exercised in a vacuum of norms, that creates the main problem for contemporary ethics.

III

Herewith we come to the theme of technology which I had named, together with the theories of nature and man, as the third, and practical, determinant of the present situation. It will be my contention in what follows that the dialectical togetherness of these two facts—the profound demotion of man's metaphysical rank by modern science (both natural and human), and the extreme promotion of his power by modern technology (based on this self-same science)—constitutes the major

ethical challenge of our day, and that Judaism cannot and need not be silent in the face of it.

Modern technology is distinguished from previous, often quite ingenious, technology by its scientific basis. It is a child of natural science: it is that science brought to bear on its object, indifferent nature, in terms of action. Science had made nature "fit," cognitively and emotionally, for the kind of treatment that was eventually applied to it. Under its gaze the nature of things, reduced to the aimlessness of their atoms and causes, was left with no dignity of its own. But that which commands no reverence can be commanded, and, released from cosmic sacrosanctity, all things are for unlimited use. If there is nothing terminal in nature, no formation in its productions that fulfills an origination intention, then anything can be *done* with nature without violating its integrity, for there *is* no integrity to be violated in a nature conceived in the terms of natural science alone—a nature neither created nor creative. If nature is mere object, in no sense subject, if it expresses no creative will, either of its own or of its cause, then man remains as the sole subject and the sole will. The world then, after first having become the object of man's knowledge, becomes the object of his will, and his knowledge is put at the service of his will; and the will is, of course, a will for power over things. That will, once the increased power has overtaken necessity, becomes sheer desire, of which there is no limit.

What is the moral significance of technological power? Let us first consider a psychological effect. The liberties which man can take with a nature made metaphysically neutral by science and no longer accorded an inherent integrity that must be respected as inviolable; the actual and ever increasing extent of the mastery exercised over it; the triumphal remaking and outwitting of creation by man according to his projects; the constant demonstration of what we can do plus the unlimited prospects of what we might yet do; and finally the utterly mystery-free, businesslike rationality of the methods employed—this whole power experience, certified by cumulative success, dissipates the last vestiges of that reverence for nature, that sense of dependence, awe, and piety, which it had inspired in man throughout the ages, and some of which could still survive the purely theoretical analysis of nature. Kant, sober Newtonian that he was, could still voice the profound admiration with which the starry sky above filled his heart, and could even place it alongside the admiration for the moral law within. "Which one did we put there?" asked the post-Sputnik boy when his father explained one of the constellations to him. Some ineffable quality has gone out of the shape of things when manipulation invades the very sphere which has always stood as a paradigm for what man cannot interfere with. "How is it

done? How could we do the same? How could we do it even better?"—the mere question divests the nature of things of a sublimity which might stay our hands.

If it is true that both religion and morality originally drew sustenance from a sense of piety which cosmic mystery and majesty instilled in the soul—a sense of being excelled in the order of things by something not only physically beyond our reach but also in quality beyond our virtue: if the wonder and humility before nature had something to do with a readiness to pay homage also to norms issued in the name of an eternal order—then there must be some moral implication in the loss of this sense, in the nakedness of things without their noumenal cloak, offered up for our conquering rape. If reverence or shame has any share in the hold which moral laws may have on us, then the experience of technological power, which expunges reverence and shame, cannot be without consequences for our ethical condition.

IV

But, it may be objected, if *nature* has lost man's respect and ceased to be an object of his reverence, one might expect his respect for himself to have risen in proportion. Man must have gained in metaphysical status what nature has lost—even what God has lost: man has stepped into His place as creator, the maker of new worlds, the sovereign refashioner of things. And indeed, admiration for man's achievement after his long ages of helplessness, and for the genius behind it, is profound and surely not unjust. The collective self-congratulation in which it finds voice sometimes takes the form of humanistic deification: the divine is in man—witness what he can *do*. But there we come before the paradox noted before, viz., that with his very triumph man himself has become engulfed in the metaphysical devaluation which was the premise and the consequence of that triumph. For he must see himself as part of that nature which he has found to be manipulable and which he learns how to manipulate more and more. We have seen before how through modern science he lost the attribute of "image-of-God," as he is not only the subject but also the object of his scientific knowledge—of physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, etc. What we must see now is that he is not merely the *theoretical* object of his knowledge and of the consequent revision of the image he entertains of himself: he is also the object of his own technological power. He can remake himself as he can nature. Man today, or very soon, can make man "to specification"—today already through socio-political and psychological techniques, tomorrow

through biological engineering, eventually perhaps through the juggling of genes.

The last prospect is the most terrifying of all. Against this power of his own, man is as unprotected by an inviolable principle of ultimate, metaphysical integrity as external nature is in its subjection to his desires: those desires themselves he may now undertake to "program" in advance—according to what? According to his desires and expediences, of course—those of the future according to those of the present. And while the conditioning by today's psychological techniques, odious as it may be, is still reversible, that by tomorrow's biological techniques would be irreversible. For the first time, man may be able to determine, not only *how* he is to *live*, but *what* in his constitution he is to *be*. The accident of his emergence from a blind but age-long dynamic of nature (if accident indeed it was) is to be compounded by what can only be termed accident of the second power: by man's now taking a hand in his further evolution *in the light of his ephemeral concepts*.

For let no one confound the presence of a plan with the absence of accident. Its execution may or may not be proof against the intervention of accident: its very conception, as to motives, end, and means, must in the nature of things human be thoroughly accidental. The more far-reaching the plan, the greater becomes the disproportion between the range of its effects and the chance nature of its origin. The most foolish, the most deluded, the most shortsighted enterprises—let alone the most wicked—have been carefully planned. The most "farsighted" plans—farsighted as to the distance of the intended goal—are children of the concepts of the day, of what at the moment is taken for knowledge and approved as desirable: approved so, we must add, by those who happen to be in control. Be their intentions ever so unblemished by self-interest (a most unlikely event), these intentions are still but an option of the shortsighted moment which is to be imposed on an indefinite future. Thus the slow-working accidents of nature, which by the very patience of their small increments, large numbers, and gradual decisions, may well cease to be "accident" in the outcome, are to be replaced by the fast-working accidents of man's hasty and biased decisions, not exposed to the long test of the ages. His uncertain ideas are to set the goals of generations, with a certainty borrowed from the presumptive certainty of the means. The latter presumption is doubtful enough, but this doubtfulness becomes secondary to the prime question that arises when man indeed undertakes to "make himself": *In what image* of his own devising shall he do so, even granted that he can be sure of the means? In fact, of course, he can be sure of neither, not of the end, nor of the means,

once he enters the realm where he plays with the roots of life. Of one thing only he can be sure: of his *power* to move the foundations and to cause incalculable and irreversible consequences. Never was so much power coupled with so little guidance for its use. Yet there is a compulsion, once the power is there, to use it anyway.

V

Modern ethical theory, or philosophical ethics, has notoriously no answer to this quandary of contemporary man. Pragmatism, emotivism, linguistic analysis deal with the facts, meanings, and expressions of man's goal-setting, but not with the principles of it—denying, indeed, that there are such principles. And existentialism even holds that there ought not to be: Man, determining his essence by his free act of existence, must neither be bound nor helped by any once-for-all principles and rules. "At this point," as Brand Blanshard remarks, "the linguistic moralists of Britain make a curious rapprochement with the existentialists of the continent. The ultimate act of choice is, for both alike, an act of will responsible to nothing beyond itself."¹

To me it is amazing that none of the contemporary schools in ethical theory comes to grips with the awesome problem posed by the combination of this anarchy of human choosing with the apocalyptic power of contemporary man—the combination of near-omnipotence with near-emptiness. The question must be asked: Can we afford the happy-go-lucky contingency of subjective ends and preferences when (to put it in Jewish language) the whole future of the divine creation, the very survival of the image of God have come to be placed in our fickle hands? Surely Judaism must take a stand here, and in taking it must not be afraid to challenge some of the cherished beliefs of modernity. So I will dare a few Jewish comments on the contemporary ethical predicament.

First a word about the alleged theoretical finality of modern immanence and the death of transcendence, or, the ultimate truth of reductionism. This is very much a matter of the "emperor's clothes" in reverse: "But he has nothing on!" exclaimed the child, and with this one flash of innocence dispelled the make-believe, and everybody saw that the emperor was naked. Something of this kind was the feat of the Enlightenment, and it was liberating. But when in the subsequent nihilistic stage—our own—the confirmed reductionist or cynic, no longer the open-eyed child but a dogmatist himself, triumphantly states, "there is nothing there!"—then, lo and behold, once said with the tautological

¹*Reason and Goodness* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), p. 254.

vigor of the positivist dogma behind it, namely that there *is* only that which science can verify, then, indeed, with eyes so conditioned; or through spectacles so tinted, we do see nothing but the nakedness we are meant to see. And there is nothing more to be seen—for certain things are of a kind that they are visible only to a certain kind of vision and, indeed, vanish from sight when looked at with eyes instructed otherwise. Thus, the bald assertion that the emperor has no clothes on may itself be the cause for the clothes not to be seen anymore; it may itself strip them off; but then its negative truth and our verification of it by our induced blindness are merely self-confirmatory and tautological.

This is the fate suffered by the biblical propositions that God created the heaven and the earth, that he saw that his creation was good, that he created man in his image, that it has been made known to man what is good, that the word is written in our heart. These propositions, i.e., what through the symbolism of their literal meaning they suggest about reality, are of course in no way "refuted" by anything science has found out about the world and ourselves. No discovery about the laws and functions of matter *logically* affects the possibility that these very laws and functions may subserve a spiritual, creative will. It is, however, the case, as in the reversed story of Christian Andersen, that the *psychological* atmosphere created by science and reinforced by technology is peculiarly unfavorable to the *visibility* of that transcendent dimension which the biblical propositions claim for the nature of things. Yet some equivalent of their meaning, however remote from the literalness of their statement, must be preserved if we are still to be Jews and, beyond that special concern of ours, if there is still to be an answer to the moral quest of man. Shall we plead for the protection of a sense of mystery? If nothing more, it will put some restraints on the headlong race of reason in the service of an emancipated, fallible will.

VI

Let us just realize how desperately needed in the field of action such biblical restraints have become by that very triumph of technology which in the field of thought has made us so particularly indisposed to recognize their authority. By the mere scale of its effects, modern technological power, to which almost anything has become feasible, forces upon us goals of a type that was formerly the preserve of utopias. To put it differently: technological power has turned what ought to be tentative, perhaps enlightening plays of speculative reason, into competing blueprints for projects, and in choosing between them we have to choose between extremes of remote effects. We live in the era of "enor-

mous consequences" of human action (witness the bomb, but also the impending threat of biological engineering)—irreversible consequences that concern the total condition of nature on our globe and the very kind of creatures that shall or shall not populate it. The face or image of creation itself, including the image of man, is involved in the explosion of technological might. The older and comforting belief that human nature remains the same and that the image of God in it will assert itself against all defacements by man-made conditions, becomes untrue if we "engineer" this nature genetically and be the sorcerers (or sorcerer's apprentices) that make the future race of Golems.

In consequence of the inevitably "utopian" scale of modern technology, the salutary gap between everyday and ultimate issues, between occasions for prudence and common decency and occasions for illuminated wisdom is steadily closing. Living constantly now in the shadow of unwanted, automatic utopianism, we are constantly now confronted with issues that require ultimate wisdom—an impossible situation for man in general, because he does not possess that wisdom, and for contemporary man in particular, because he even denies the existence of its object: transcendent truth and absolute value, beyond the relativities of expediency and subjective preference. We need wisdom most when we believe in it least.

VII

It is not my purpose here to argue the "truth" of Judaism in general, or of those biblical propositions in particular which we found to be repudiated by modern beliefs. Rather I ask: *if* we are Jews—and a corresponding question Christians and Muslims must ask themselves—what counsel can we take from the perennial Jewish stance in the pressing dilemma of our time? The first such counsel, I believe, is one of modesty in estimating our own cleverness in relation to our forebears. It is the modern conviction, nourished by the unprecedented progress in our knowledge of things and our consequent power over things, that *we know better*, not only in this but *in every respect*, than all the ages before us. Yet nothing justifies the belief that science can teach us everything we need to know, nor the belief that what it does teach us makes us wiser than our ancestors were in discerning the proper ends of life and thus the proper *use* of the things we now so abundantly control. The arrogance with which the scientifically emboldened reason looks down on past ignorance and, thus blinded to past wisdom, assumes confident jurisdiction over the ultimate issues of our existence, is not only terrifying in its possible consequences, i.e., objectionable on grounds of

prudence, but also impious as an attitude in lacking the humility that must balance any self-confidence of finite man. Such humility, or modesty, would be willing to lend an ear to what tradition has to say about the transempirical, nondemonstrable meaning of things. Attention to our tradition is a Jewish prescription, directing us, not only to the human wisdom we may pick up there, but also to the voice of revelation we may hear through it. At the least, the modesty of thus listening—a modesty amply justified by our helplessness before the fruits and uses of our acquired powers—may guard us from rashly dismissing the seemingly archaic biblical views as mere mythology that belongs to the infancy of man and has been outgrown by our maturity. The simple attentiveness of such a stance may help us realize that we are not completely our own masters, still less those of all posterity, but rather trustees of a heritage. If nothing else, the tempering of our presumed superiority by that injection of humility will make us cautious, and caution is the urgent need for the hour. It will make us go slow on discarding old taboos, on brushing aside in our projects the sacrosanctity of certain domains hitherto surrounded by a sense of mystery, awe, and shame.

VIII

The recovery of that sense, something more positive than the merely negative sense of caution which humility suggests, is the next step. Informed by the idea of creation, it will take the form of *reverence* for certain inviolable integrities sanctioned by that idea. The doctrine of creation teaches reverence toward nature and toward man, with highly topical, practical applications in both directions.

As to nature, it means especially living nature, and the reverence in question is reverence for life. Immediately we see the practical impact of a creationist view on the choices open to modern technology. God, in the Genesis story, set man over all the other creatures and empowered him to their sovereign use: but they are still his creatures, intended to be and to adorn his earth. Subjection, not biological impoverishment, was man's mandate. Nowhere does the Jewish idea of man's preeminence in the created scheme justify his heedless plundering of this planet. On the contrary, his rulership puts him in the position of a responsible caretaker, and doubly so today, when science and technology have really made him master over this globe, with powers to either uphold or undo the work of creation. While biblical piety saw nature's dependence on God's creative and sustaining will, we now also know its *vulnerability* to the interferences of our developed powers. This knowledge

should heighten our sense of responsibility. Exploit we must the resources of life, for this is the law of life itself and belongs to the order of creation, but we ought to exploit with respect and piety. Care for the integrity of creation should restrain our greed. Even if it means forgoing some abundance or convenience, we must not reduce the wealth of kinds, must not create blanks in the great spectrum of life, nor needlessly extinguish any species. Even if it hurts the interest of the moment, we must, for instance, stop the murder of the great whales.

I say this is a religious or ethical responsibility derived from the idea of creation which sanctions the whole of nature with an intrinsic claim to integrity. It is, of course, also plain utilitarian common sense, putting the long-range advantage of our earthbound race before the short calculations of present need, greed, or whim. But quite apart from these parallel counsels of prudence (so easily buffeted by the winds of partisan argument, and always conditional upon the conceptions of our advantage and the cogency of our reasoning), it is something absolute, the respect for the manifestation of life on this earth, which should oppose an unconditional "no" to the depletion of the six-day's plentitude—and also, we might add, to its perversion by man-made genetic monstrosities.

IX

With even greater force than for nature does the idea of creation inspire reverence for *man*, for he alone is said to be created "in the image of God." The ethical implications of this mysterious concept are vast and would deserve fuller elaboration, I will here just indicate a few.

Concerning the "shaping" of this image by man himself, the Jewish posture should be, in the briefest formula: education—yes; genetic manipulation—no. The first kind of shaping is our duty, and of necessity mankind has been doing it, badly or well, since the beginnings of civil society. We may grievously err in the ends and the means of education, but our mistakes can still be redeemed, if not by their victims themselves, then by a coming generation: nothing has been irretrievably prejudged, the potential of human freedom is left intact. At its best, education fosters this very freedom; at worst, it does not preclude a new beginning in which the struggling, true form of man may yet be vindicated.

A different thing is the dream of some of our frontiersmen of science: the genetic remaking of man in some image, or assortment of images, of our own choosing, which in fact would be the scientist's according to his lights. The potentially infinite, transcendent "image" would shrink to charts of desired properties, selected by ideology (or will it be expediency? or fad?), turned into blueprints by computer-aided geneticists,

authorized by political power—at last inserted with fateful finality into the future evolution of the species by biological technology. From sperm- and ovary-banks there is only one step to synthetic gene-pattern- ing, with a catalogue of samples to suit different tastes or needs.

Here again, quite apart from the terrible danger of error and short-sightedness inherent in our fallibility, quite apart, that is, from considerations of prudence—we simply must not try to fixate man in any image of our own definition and thereby cut off the as yet unrevealed promises of the image of God. We have not been authorized, so Jewish piety would say, to be makers of a new image, nor can we claim the wisdom and knowledge to arrogate that role. If there is any truth in man's being created in the image of God, then awe and reverence and, yes, utter fear, an ultimate metaphysical shudder, ought to prevent us from meddling with the profound secret of what is man.

Or, to take a less apocalyptic or fanciful and at the moment much more real example, Jewish morality should say: persuasion—yes; but not psychological manipulation such as brainwashing, subliminal conditioning, and what other techniques there are, be they practiced in Peking or New York. I need not elaborate. The reader can easily draw the connection from the idea of the image of God to the principle of respect for the person, his freedom, and his dignity. The protest should always be against turning men into things. My general point is that the idea of creation provides a ground for reverence, and that from this reverence there issue definite ethical precepts in the context of our present situation.

One may object that these precepts, as far as our examples show, are of the restraining or prohibiting kind only, telling us what not to do, but not what to do. True, but it is at least a beginning. Also, we may remember that even the Ten Commandments are mostly don't's and not do's. Moreover, the negative emphasis fits the modern situation, whose problem, as we have seen, is an excess of power to "do" and thus an excess of offers for doing. Overwhelmed by our own possibilities—an unprecedented situation this—we need first of all criteria for rejection. There is reasonable consensus on what decency, honesty, justice, charity *bid* us to do in given circumstances, but great confusion on what we are *permitted* to do of the many things that have become feasible to us, and some of which we must *not* do on any account.

X

Let me conclude with one last instance of such rejection, which may not fall on too willing ears among Jews, who notoriously value length of life. Contemporary biology holds out the promise of indefinite pro-

longation of individual life. This must seem glad tidings to those who, in accord with an ever sounded theme of mankind, consider mortality an evil, a curse, which may yet be lifted from us, at least be lessened by indefinite delay. But if we abolish death, we must abolish procreation as well, the birth of new life, for the latter is life's answer to the former; and so we would have a world of old age with no youth. But youth is our hope, the eternal promise of life's retaining its spontaneity. With their ever new beginning, with all their foolishness and fumbling, it is the young that ever renew and thus keep alive the sense of wonder, of relevance, of the unconditional, of ultimate commitment, which (let us be frank) goes to sleep in us as we grow older and tired. It is the young, not the old, that are ready to give their life, to die for a cause.

So let us be Jews also in this. With young life pressing after us, we can grow old and, sated with days, resign ourselves to death—giving youth and therewith life a new chance. In acknowledging his finitude under God, a Jew, if he still is a Jew, must be able to say with the Psalmist:

We bring our years to an end as a tale that is told.
The days of our years are threescore years and ten,
Or even by reason of strength fourscore years
So teach us to number our days,
That we may get us a heart of wisdom.

(Ps. 90:10-12)