

LEON ROTH

1896-1963

I

BORN in London on 31 March 1896, Hyam Leon Roth died suddenly of a heart-attack on 1 April 1963, the day after his 67th birthday, when in New Zealand on a tour with his wife. *The Times* had an appreciative obituary notice on 5 April. He left three sons and a daughter. Dr. Cecil Roth, the distinguished Reader in Jewish Studies at Oxford, is a younger brother.

From the City of London School he entered Exeter College, Oxford, as a Classical Scholar in 1915, but soon left in order to share the lot of his generation in military service (1916-18), first on the Western Front, from which he was withdrawn to be commissioned to the Jewish Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. Returning to his college undamaged, he had R. R. Marett as his tutor there, and outside its walls was drawn, like many others of us of that generation, into the circle of H. H. Joachim, one of the kindest and wisest of the senior Oxford philosophers. On graduating in Lit. Hum. in 1920 he was singled out for the John Locke Scholarship in Mental Philosophy, and gave an early sign of his wide capacity by becoming, in the next year, James Mew Hebrew Scholar. After proceeding to the D.Phil. he passed on (1923) to a Lecturership in Philosophy at Manchester University, under the congenial headship of the patriarchal Samuel Alexander, who retired two years later (J. L. Stocks succeeding him): the invitation came on the very day when, in despair after applying unsuccessfully for several suitable posts, he was to be articulated to a solicitor, so that we must add to Alexander's record the saving of a remarkably gifted man for philosophical scholarship. During his four years there he produced three books of obvious maturity, one of which, a large and scholarly edition of letters between Descartes and Constantine Huygens (father of the mathematician and physicist), was immediately recognized in France by his being made Officier d'Académie (1926). In 1928 he was called to the Ahad Ha'am Chair of Philosophy at the recently opened Hebrew University of Jerusalem. To this he gave prodigally the twenty-five most vigorous years of his life. One of his pioneering enterprises there was the making

available of a series of Hebrew translations of Western philosophical classics, ranging from Plato to Russell, many done with his own hand. One of his colleagues has said that his Hebrew was 'simple and beautiful' (and his speaking of it marked by an 'attractive English accent'). His versions were certainly praised as well for their style as their skill, and will probably become historic, for one of his main aims was to devise a philosophical terminology for modern Hebrew. From 1940 to 1943 he was Rector of the University, piloting it through the difficulties of war-time conditions, with the special agony of anxiety and mourning over the macabre plight of fellow Jews on the mainland of Europe. His election into the Academy in 1948 was a rare honour for an English scholar long settled abroad. In 1953 he resigned his Chair and returned to England. Although without personal ambitions, he was forced by the change of philosophical climate here to be content with continuing his favourite studies and giving occasional lectures to Jewish cultural societies. No university in these islands made use of his long experience of academic administration and his high gifts as scholar and teacher. He was in India during the winters of 1955-6 and 1956-7 for his own mental enlargement; was Visiting Professor at the College of Jewish Studies, Chicago, in 1957, and at Brown University, Providence, R.I. in 1958; and in 1960 lectured for a month at a summer course in Stellenbosch University, near Cape Town.

Those who knew him personally confirm the impression I get strongly from his writings that his mind and life were dominated by the ideal of intellectual clarity, order and integrity, and by a religious outlook that was stiffened from top to bottom by an unyielding moral emphasis. These two controls were inseparably used in his philosophical teaching oral and written, making it at once firm and large-visioned, and in the interpretation and liberalization of the long Jewish tradition (he was a liberal in all things), the study of which he conducted with reference to what are for most of us recondite sources. Here, as in his edition of Descartes-Huygens and his translations from Greek into modern Hebrew, his philological skill was amply though unostentatiously proved. He might indeed have become a philologist. The First World War, he once told a friend, saved him from that, by which he meant, I suspect, that a deeply shaken world needed to be deeply understood and deeply served. It was in the Oxford of the early twenties, instinct with the sense of a resumed civilization, and possessing a

remarkable constellation of philosophical dons—J. A. Smith, Joachim, Joseph, Ross, Webb, Pritchard, and Collingwood—that he turned his chief affection to philosophy. This being the only part of his wide field in which I can claim any competence, I shall have to confine myself to it.

II

His labours in philosophy lay chiefly in the history of it. Interest in this declined in English academic circles in the thirties, and since the war has almost died out, only Plato, Hume, and the vicissitudes of logic retaining much attention. In consequence Roth's work has been little recognized here. It was marked by scholarship of a high order—a searching for and in source—materials with the appropriate range and degree of linguistic competence, and an ability to come out of the jumble with enriching and enlightening contributions. The figure of central and lasting interest was Spinoza. The latter's reputed relation to Cartesianism prodded him to a re-examination of Descartes; and the rumoured relation (for in England it was but a rumour) to the much earlier Maimonides needed to be made plain to English teachers of philosophy, all of whom, except only Roth himself, lacked the oriental equipment requisite for the confident understanding of a medieval Jew steeped in a heavily arabized Greek philosophy that was to break into Western thought through the Arabs and Jews of Moorish Spain. It was on Spinoza, Descartes, and Maimonides that Roth did most of his work.

His contribution to our knowledge of Descartes will be a convenient starting-point. The French literature on Descartes is so large that few English scholars have been drawn into the exploration of it. On our side of the Channel we had to wait, apart from Roth's studies, until A. Boyce Gibson's *Philosophy of Descartes* (1932), S. V. Keeling's *Descartes* (1934), and N. Kemp Smith's *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes* (1952) in order to see how much we need French scholarship for the study of France's classical philosopher. Roth preceded them. His edition of the correspondence between Descartes and Constantine Huygens is in substance as well as physical appearance his *magnum opus*. There his concern was direct, not slanted towards Spinoza. A private owner of the manuscripts had placed them at his disposal. When he had worked at them he found that this hitherto unlocated cache (which soon passed to the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris) contained three times

as many autographs of Descartes as the largest other collection, that less than a third of them had been known through copies and published, and that the series of letters between the two men was apparently complete. His editing of the letters and related documents (in French, Latin, and Dutch) was exemplary, and his introduction a model of concise comprehensiveness. Charles Adam, the respected editor of the standard edition of Descartes' correspondence, greeted the volume with the judgement, 'on ne sait ce qu'on doit le plus admirer—minutieuse exactitude, heureuse sagacité et scrupuleuse conscience'. A succinct summary of the biographical importance of the correspondence is given by Roth in his paper read in 1937 at the Congrès Descartes in Paris: in particular he there indicates the need to correct the picture of Descartes by Clerselier's altered transcription of the letters, and by Baillet's *Life*, which depends on Clerselier.

He had already studied Descartes from the point of view of Spinoza's connexion with Cartesianism in his *Spinoza, Descartes and Maimonides* (1924). This was his first book, modest-looking with its 148 small pages and unclamorous in the presentation of its contention, yet a piece of excellent scholarship. Here, as in his later writings, he did not scoop all his gathered dust into his pages; he selected what was relevant to his theme. The theme was original so far as I know, and certainly so in his way of working it out: it was that Spinoza, far from being a Cartesian, was an anti-Cartesian. He was contradicting the almost solid agreement of the most-read writers on the history of philosophy that Spinozism is Cartesianism logically cleansed and completed. He saw much more than the common enthusiasm of Descartes and Spinoza for the geometrical method and their concurrence in the definition of the term 'substance', and much more than Spinoza's wider use of that method and stricter application of that definition. Delving down to the mental attitude operative in each of the two systems he exhibited them as worlds apart.

What he wrote on Descartes in this connexion is valuable outside of it, that is, as pure exegesis. I surely cannot be the only person who has found Descartes' philosophizing puzzling, if not disappointing from so able a man. As the puzzles do not all lessen under close scrutiny, resort to some general supposition seems to be required. I myself could get no relief until I supposed that his ruling interest was in natural science, and that his philosophy was a justification, for the eyes of the theological doctors of the Sorbonne, of the propriety of studying the material world wholly in material terms, as if it were a closed

or independent system. Roth held some such view, with a far fuller grasp of the evidence than I ever had. With that view he explained the obvious disparity between the way of reasoning proclaimed in the *Discourse on Method* and the way actually followed in Descartes' metaphysical theorizing both in the *Discourse* and in the *Meditations*. The famous method, Roth argued, was intended not for his philosophy but for his natural science: the only place where he employed it extensively was his *Principles*, which is his treatise on physics. The historical result, Roth observes, was unfortunate for the high claim which he had made for the method, since this prescribed an *a priori* procedure, and it was just because his physical or cosmological system was *a priori* that it could not long survive its eventual confrontation with Newtonianism. Only in pure mathematics did the method turn out to be in his own hands what he had claimed it to be for natural science, namely, one of discovery and demonstration at the same time—which, as Roth remarks, is not surprising, seeing that it was from pure mathematics that the method had been analysed out.

This contention about the intended limitation of the method was amplified in Roth's *Descartes' Discourse on Method* (1937, the tercentenary of the piece named). That the *Discourse* was the first of four tracts within a single volume, and that the other three were scientific, every lecturer knows, and has probably a vague recollection that Descartes somewhere says that the other three were 'specimens' of the method announced in the first; yet most of us probably go on talking to our students as if the first was a statement of his *metaphysical* method. What Roth drew from the acceptance of Descartes' word, and from the view that the metaphysical system was an apologetic preface to his physical cosmology, was that the odd point at which God is introduced into the metaphysical system receives an explanation: for by putting this system first he had precluded himself from arguing traditionally from cosmology to God as the *primum mobile*, and therefore had to find an argument in the converse direction, which he did by inferring from the veracity of God to the trustworthiness of our mathematico-physical notions and of our apprehension of their logical relations (although he had already been trusting his reason in his proofs of the reality of God). I find the explanation much more precisely illuminating than the usual reference to an Augustinian note in Descartes' theological outlook, even though the presence of this is certainly discernible.

In the book of 1924, with its main question whether or no Spinoza was really a Cartesian, Roth fastens on Descartes' basic and reiterated appeal to 'clear and distinct' ideas, where 'distinct' means thinkable apart from other ideas. One form of that appeal was that the logical order starts from simple ideas and the physical order from 'simple natures'. In other words—this is Roth's main shot—Descartes had committed himself to discreteness. It suited the mathematical physics he had in view, with its space composed of points and time of instants. The discreteness was pressed for existents as well as for ideas: from a thing's existence at any one moment its existence at the next cannot be inferred. He could therefore account for continuity of existence (or such quasi-continuity as his analysis of time might leave room for) only by postulating continual creation by God. Further, he conceived God rather as will than as intellect, and consequently His every act as an inscrutable fiat. These doctrines amount to a very strange sort of rationalism. Despite his emphasis on a *lumen naturale*, on self-evident truths, on a method of advance by intuitively evident steps, his bias towards notional and real discreteness and towards theological voluntarism implies an unintelligible world and a God distinct from it, not inferable from it, and incomprehensible; which means that neither a rational natural science nor a rational natural theology should be possible.

That for Roth is Cartesianism. In the light of that analysis he gives a clear answer to his question about Spinoza. Cartesianism as so understood through its operative outlook and biases was not only not received and developed by Spinoza but was deeply and regularly contradicted by him. Descartes was logically, physically, and metaphysically an 'atomist', Spinoza a thorough-going monist or holist, believing that anything short of the universal whole involves some misconception. The universe, to be intelligible, must be a unity, and we are obliged to believe that it is intelligible if we are to take reason seriously; and it cannot be a unity unless God is wholly present throughout as the principle of its order (Roth sees this as panentheism rather than pantheism). Again to be intelligible, the universe cannot be the product of will, which in any case is a very anthropomorphic analogue. Roth reminds us that Spinoza rejected also Descartes' doctrine of will as *man's* primary perfection, with its two corollaries that judging is willing, so that assent is not wholly a function of evidence, and that the will has power over the emotions.

That for Roth is Spinozism; and as Spinoza's opposition to discreteness and voluntarism is written all over his system, the contrast, so radical and extensive, makes it plainly wrong to classify him as a Cartesian. The argument is principled and beautifully clear. In his *Spinoza* (1929) Roth passed to direct exegesis, acute and unwordy.

If Spinoza was not a follower of Descartes, whom did he follow? The question is, of course, falsely put, since it supposes that his system is not original. We may ask, however, whether anything resembling his ruling ideas can be discerned in the literature available to him in the formative years when he was a member of the Jewish community at Amsterdam. Roth explored this area in his book of 1924. In so doing he had predecessors among German scholars, but not, so far as I am aware, among British ones. It was in the virtually unavoidable Maimonides that he found striking similarities of motive and argument, even occasionally of expression. Maimonides was a champion of a rationalist philosophy of religion against the methods, dogmas, and dogmatism of the Arabic-writing theologians, who took the imaginative language of the Koran literally. He maintained that as with the Koran so too with the Old Testament the imagery should be stripped away and the spiritual meaning laid bare; and that when this is done the conception of God is freed from attributes derived from human nature, and that we are left with truths that are seen to be such by reason, not dicta to be accepted blindly. Roth points out that a similar opposition to anthropomorphism and to any external authority over theoretical thinking is a leading feature of Spinoza's exposition of the Old Testament in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, besides being, as is well known, dominant throughout the *Ethica*. On the general problem of cosmology, or natural theology as then conceived, Maimonides rejected the Muslim theologians' insistence on the incomprehensibility of Nature, based partly on a fear that a perfectly ordered system would be regarded as requiring no God for its explanation: on the contrary, he said, orderliness throughout, in a single continuous system, is the very pre-condition of argument to the reality of God, disorder leading to a general scepticism as its only logical conclusion. The similarity to Spinoza's ruling metaphysical outlook is at once recognizable. Not that these similarities make the later Jew a mere disciple of the earlier one, since the systems they constructed are different; but Roth makes it plain that their emphasis on system, their reasons for it, their

objective rationalism, and their preservation through all this of a deeply religious attitude, stamp them as kindred spirits. Roth published a most useful exposition of Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* in 1948, useful at any rate to those of us who lack specialized knowledge of the Arabic and Jewish background.

His conclusion about the whole matter was that Spinoza's philosophical outlook and ideas developed early through the familiarity with early and contemporary Jewish thought which his membership of the synagogue-community brought him by such means as formal instruction, public addresses, conversation, and the reading to which these prompted him (one sample of which Roth described in an article of 1922 on Joseph del Medigo). The most careful statement of the conclusion seems to me to be in his *Spinoza* (p. 229): 'There is not a single one of Spinoza's doctrines which cannot be traced to works open to him while still a youth. . . . Spinoza's starting-point is not a development from Cartesianism, nor was it adopted in revulsion from Cartesianism. It is that in the light of which he was able to see, and to accept or reject, the tendency of that doctrine. Spinoza brought it to, he was not led to it by, his study of the Cartesian philosophy.'

III

Of Roth's personal exploration of philosophical problems there are only two published examples in English, both written shortly before he left for Jerusalem. The exigencies of the new university there—teaching, providing printed material in Hebrew, helping to shape policy and organization, into all of which he threw himself with a sense of mission—allowed him no leisure to articulate his mind on the problems that bother philosophers.

One of the examples is a short book described as 'on the methods of ethics' (1928), suggestions for giving direction and firmness to a field of study which, he believed, had fallen into stagnation. He would make a science of it, for conscience and morality are facts, and have demonstrably grown: moral values can be studied non-mysteriously as standards that have come about through long struggle, so that an evolutionary theory (not zoological) should so far be possible; and psychology can expose the unscientific dogmas about the human mind that are embedded in some of the older ethical systems (he instances Hobbes's *homo homini lupus*). While ends emerge and are not

ephemeral, in daily practice 'the world of morals is a world of means', i.e. of actions, 'the deed done and its calculus of results' mattering more than character; and the calculus runs on from neighbour through the widening groups to mankind, from part to whole. There is room, then, for scientific method in ethics—observation, testing hypotheses, and when tested predicting by them—if we remember that scientists now think more in terms of continuity than analytically, and that their thinking is circular as well as linear, that is, besides inferring from or in accordance with principles they return upon these to correct or refine them. These reminders amount to saying that individual facts are functions of a field. So too individuals are unintelligible in separation. Whether or no there is a permanent set of inter-related needs and interests constituting human nature, on which the praxis of a future better society could be built, is a question which Roth reserved for metaphysics.

The other example is an article on 'The Goodness of God' (1927). It is confined to an analysis of the two concepts and the ground of their connexion. Apart from definition within a particular system the proposition that God is good is not, Roth maintains, an analytic one: etymologically the two terms have no connexion, and in fact the divine, whether as God or gods, has not always been thought of as good to humans. Rejecting as wrong in fact and unhelpful for theoretical thinking Otto's doctrine that the proposition stated above expresses a primal intuition, Roth declares that developed religion emerged when the felt (not conceived) 'numinous' was linked first with mythical cosmogony, then with critical cosmology, the idea of God thus arising explicitly as that of a single creator of the universe, polytheism being seen to involve chaos. No attribute of goodness follows from being the one creator. Goodness belongs to the order of moral ideas. Roth regards as apt, if incomplete, the definition of the moral viewpoint as that of an impartial spectator. This idea, carried to completion, is of a mind without the limitation or bias of a physically and socially conditioned individual, a family, a nation or race, or an age. The idea of one who thus sees all and does so without partiality comes quite naturally to be attached to the idea of one who made all. The linkage, then, of God and goodness is a construction, not analytic, not intuitive, so that developed religion (by which Roth means monotheism) is 'an intellectual system of the universe', not a sense of impenetrable mystery. Roth is careful to point out (the voice is that of Spinoza) that goodness as

limitless impartiality, as the right ordering of the universe in its entirety, is not the goodness we know empirically, which is a relation of man to man. 'God is good' is therefore to be taken not as partiality to man but in an austere objective sense. Whether or no the constructed proposition is true of reality is a further question, in pursuing which, he remarks, we should have to take into account the facts of primary religious and moral experience, recognizing them to be as real as all other facts.

It would have been interesting to see these two sober essays developed. They show that Roth was concerned to insist on the autonomy of morality, in the sense not of being sundered from religion but of being unservile to it, that he recoiled from pontification and mystification, and that he believed in the power of reason, when applying its own scruples and aspirations to the facts of human and subhuman Nature, to discern a universal structure, in which intellectual, moral, and religious values are integral to the whole.

Among his many occasional papers for Jewish audiences there is one, apparently his last piece of writing, in which he asks what is meant by the term 'Jewish Philosophy'. It is often, and most properly he thinks, used for the philosophical elucidation of the fundamentals of Judaism, sometimes with the claim that Judaism holds solutions of the chief metaphysical problems. Whether or no its solutions are the right ones requires, however, the labours of philosophy with no adjective, unconfined in both its questioning and its answering, and he presses the case for the toleration of this wider discipline. He does not wish to displace the narrower one, for the Greek gift of an intellectual technique is needed to draw out cogently the implications of an unbending monotheistic faith. Some of these he compactly mentions in his book *Judaism, a Portrait* (1960, p. 21): 'The unity of God is not an abstract consideration. It means one world, one humanity, one universal order, one norm for logic, one standard for morals; it means that truth and justice are not mere words but a way which man is expected to learn and follow.' This is well said, with a philosopher's awareness that those implications are weighty theoretical and practical merits of monotheism, not strictly proofs of it. The book exhibits Roth's characteristic balance of sensitive appreciation and frank scrutiny, honourable because it comes from within the Jewish fold and illuminating to those of us who, so far as we are Christians, are outside and yet rooted in that fold.

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