PREFACE

It is said that animals were created without tails by their maker. The Maker one day called them to come and select what tails would suit them. The first group of animals appeared and selected the longest and best tails. The second group came and received good tails. The last group were the hares, who are very lazy, and they told the other animals to pick out tails for them. The other animals, having taken the best tails for themselves, brought the short and ugly tails for the hares. If you want a thing well done, do it yourself. The story is finished.¹

This may not be sound history, but we recognize that we have acted according to its moral: when we discovered how few current books dealt with philosophy and religion in the spirit that seemed to us most promising, we decided to try to better the situation ourselves. In our eyes, the most glaring inadequacy in the current literature was its excessive dependence on Western experience alone, or the attempt to understand or solve philosophical or religious problems from the necessarily narrow standpoint of a single discipline. Like its predecessors, therefore, this book is meant for a varied readership, comprised of those who see the reasons for investigating philosophy and religion from a widely comparative point of view and a wide variety of perspectives.

The current volume is the fourth in a series entitled Philosophy and Religion. The three preceding volumes were *Rationality in Question*, *Interpretation in Religion*, and *Myths and Fictions*. Like these three volumes, this one is dedicated to a particular subject: absolutism as compared with relativism. The perennially argued relationship of the two has lost none of its interest; the difficulties it encompasses enter into every aspect of theory and practice. These difficulties are especially evident in philosophy, which now often tends toward relativism, and especially troubling in

religion, which now, as always, tends toward absolutism. We hope that the open perspectives of the present volume will help its readers to arrive at a more adequate understanding of this troubling but inevitable polarization.

In the preface of the preceding volume, the editors announced that the forthcoming volume would bear the title *Faith and Faithlessness*. *Faith and Faithlessness* is still in the course of preparation and will be the next in the series. Temporarily, faith and faithlessness have relinquished their hold on our attention to a no less momentous pair of concepts.

The approach that marks this volume is no different from that of its predecessors. That is, it does not contain and is not meant as a whole to be a systematic or panoramic view of the subject. Instead, it is a mosaic of reactions, one in which each stone, each essay, has its individual texture and color and yet fits somewhere into an interesting general picture. We hope that this mosaic will stimulate investigators to pursue their comparative studies in many different directions, and so we continue to anticipate a varied readership, whose common denominator is the desire to study the great problems of philosophy and religion from revealingly different, often non-Western perspectives.

The present volume is divided into three basic parts. The first is composed of general essays on the tension between absolutism and relativism. The second part is composed of studies that relate this tension to more particular intellectual objects. The third part is a long essay by Ben-Ami Scharfstein, in which he tries to set all the preceding essays within a single perspective, that of a single individual. To the extent that he has succeeded, the reader will be able to appreciate each of the mosaic's stones in itself, but also to see them all from a point of view whose individuality joins them into something other than or more than the sum of its stones.

This third part is of a kind somewhat new to our series. We decided on it for two reasons. The first is that we strongly believe that comparative work gets its significance from our efforts to integrate views that are otherwise too widely scattered. That is, we want look around and below the surfaces of things. But for this
third part there is another, more personal reason. Although Ben-Ami Scharfstein is one of the editors of the series in which this book appears, he is not participating in the present volume in his usual role. The reason is that all those whose essays appear here are either his friends, his colleagues, or his students. All of them have in some way taken his lead in their own attempts to see things in a wider, deeper perspective than is customary. We have therefore asked him to react to all the other authors’ essays. We regard his response, with which the book concludes, as a kind of performance that demonstrates the ideals that he has taught. His reaction is therefore not meant to summarize or criticize, but to show a characteristically encompassing temper of thought. We should also like to add that we see this book as an attempt to draw an intellectual profile of Ben-Ami Scharfstein, though this profile is but a mere sketch of the original from which it is rendered.