CHAPTER FIVE

HALAKHIC MAN AS COGNITIVE MAN

R. Soloveitchik begins his description of halakhic man after a series of preparatory sections where he describes the figure of homo religiosus in great detail so as to trace, through its negation, a profile of halakhic man. By contrast, cognitive man is the constitutive paradigm for understanding halakhic man. This chapter focuses on the sources used to substantiate the figure of cognitive man, in order to clarify the basis for R. Soloveitchik’s description of halakhic man. These sources, as will be shown, fashion halakhic man according to the idealism of Hermann Cohen and his neo-Kantian school and according to various trends in the philosophy of science.

Halakhah and Cognition: Two Types

After a brief description of halakhic man at the beginning of section v, R. Soloveitchik turns to an analysis of cognitive man. The first discussion, as noted, appears in section ii of Halakhic Man (5–8), but this is a rather general description. R. Soloveitchik merely notes there that cognitive man aims to discover the laws of existence. In this preliminary description, he devotes more attention to the personality structure of cognitive man and argues that cognitive man recoils from the esoteric and is attracted to the revealed; he abhors chaos and pursues order and explication. His description tends toward the psychologization of cognitive man (the abhorrence of chaos and the pursuit of order), but refrains from analyzing the structure of his cognition, that is, the process of cognition’s development. The detailed description of cognitive man’s cognition and consciousness begins after halakhic man enters the picture, and for a reason. R. Soloveitchik notes two features of cognitive man:

1. Access to the Qualitative Realm: Cognitive man is in immediate and impartial contact with the plethora of phenomena, and seeks to order them and organize them as “elements.” R. Soloveitchik
notes here that this quality fits the extreme and “naïve” (in his definition) positivism evident in the thought of Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius, for instance (146, n. 17). Positivists negate essentialist explanations of nature and reject the existence of “things in themselves.” Cognitive man plunges “into the very midst of reality . . . to contemplate its appearance . . . is astonished and amazed by the plethora of phenomena and by the ‘chaos and void’ which prevail in the realm of reality” (18).

2. **Creating ideal constructs.** Cognitive man imposes order on this reality by building an ideal self-contained world, that is, by creating a priori mathematical structures. “In order to overcome the mystery in existence, he constructs an ideal, ordered, and fixed world, one that is perfectly clear and lucid” (18). Cognitive man, then, is concerned with the relationship between the concrete-qualitative reality and the ideal world he has established. This is the dominant feature in the description of both cognitive and halakhic man.

The following passage is the well-known description of cognitive man, which will become the basis for the description of the cognition and consciousness of halakhic man in the next section:

This latter approach is that of mathematics and the mathematical, natural sciences, the crowning achievement of civilization. It is both a priori and ideal—i.e., to know means to construct an ideal, lawful, unified system whose necessity flows from its very nature, a system that does not require, as far as its validity and truth are concerned, precise parallelism with the corrective realm of concrete, qualitative phenomena. On the contrary, all that we have is an approximate accord. The concrete empirical triangle is not exactly identical with the ideal triangle of geometry, and the same holds true for all other mathematical constructs. There exists an ideal world and a concrete one, and between the two, only an approximate parallelism prevails. In truth, not only from a theoretical, ideal perspective does mathematics pay no attention to concrete correlatives, but even from a utilitarian standpoint the mathematical approach has no desire to apprehend the concrete world per se but seeks only to establish a relationship of parallelism and analogy. (18–19)

R. Soloveitchik refers here to the mathematization of the natural sciences that, since Newton, have undergone a continued process of mathematization, culminating in the unprecedented abstraction levels

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1 In the Hebrew original meluban ke-simlah, based on the expression mehwar ke-simlah. See Mekhilla, Mishpatim, Nezikin 13; PT Ketuboth 4: 4; TB Ketuboth 46a.