RATIONAL RABBIS: ITS PROJECT AND ARGUMENT

Menachem Fisch

*Rational Rabbis*\(^1\) aspires to make two main points, one philosophical and contemporary, the other interpretative and historical. The book’s philosophical undertaking, presented in Part I, is to develop a central insight of Karl Popper’s into a fuller theory of rational endeavor. The book’s interpretative and main undertaking, presented in Part II, is to argue (a) that the talmudic literature bears clear witness to a tannaitic view of humanly possible intellectual achievement intriguingly akin to the theory of rationality proposed in Part I, and (b) that despite appearances to the contrary, this voice is centrally responsible for the Bavli’s halakhic discourse and project. The TR session at AAR 2002 focused on this last claim by means of a close reading of the ‘meitivi’ sugya presented in Bavli, *Berakhot* 19b–20a. What follows briefly summarizes that reading and outlines its broader philosophical and hermeneutical settings.

1. Although he is one of the better known and most widely read thinkers of our time, Popper’s impact on professional philosophy has been marginal. He is widely regarded as a more-or-less effective, if semi-positivist combatant of positivism who retained little relevance in the heady aftermath of the works of Kuhn and the later Wittgenstein. *Rational Rabbis* insists that Popper’s “constructive skepticism” represents much more than a mere first step toward these more robust and better developed critiques of the conceits of modernism. Popper was primarily a philosopher of science, but I am less interested in his theory of science *per se* than in the general view of rational endeavor that this theory implies. Like many of his critics, I find his realism unfoundedly naive, his attitude toward language wholly inadequate, his portrayal of science generally simplistic and his notions of corroboration and verisimilitude largely wrongheaded. But I do find his basic fallibilism crucially important and attempt to develop it further. It is the idea that the rationality and advancement of science owe far less to a

\(^{\ast}\) This article was first published as: Menachem Fisch, “Rational Rabbis: Its Project and Argument,” in *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 4, no. 2 (2006). Reprinted with permission from the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*.

confident reliance on its data, methods and warrants, than to the self-doubting Socratic ‘dialectic of interrogation’ to which they are regularly subjected. Incapable (as a matter of logic) of objectively confirming their efforts, let alone of proving them, scientists, argues the Popperian, can, in principle, boast no more than prudently to have subjected them to the most thorough tests at the scientists’ disposal. From this follows the identification of the rational with the critical.

Popper’s fallibilism is a form of skepticism, but not of the wholesale, paralyzing Humean variety. Although serious criticism begins with doubt, criticism and doubt have little in common. Entertaining a doubt adds up to little more than applying a question mark, or raising one’s eyebrows; serious criticism, by contrast, requires fashioning an argument. To doubt is to suspect something might be amiss, to criticize is to argue that it is. Skeptical discourse requires a supply of interrogatives, critical discourse requires rich background knowledge and a developed logic of problem-seeking and solving. Criticism necessarily presupposes doubt, but is also a necessary prerequisite for positive action. In the face of suspected imperfection the first step toward improvement will always be critical. Hence the term ‘constructive skepticism’. The theory of rationality outlined in the first part of Rational Rabbis does not fall ready-made from Popper’s pen. Rather, I find his exposition lacking in two main respects. First, although Popper wrote widely, he had surprisingly little to say philosophically about the central notions of his system: criticism, rationality, problems and the processes of problem seeking and solving. They are discussed to an extent within the framework of his theory of science, but not in general. Nowhere, for instance, is the difference between criticizing and merely doubting analyzed. Nowhere does he stop to ask what must be assumed uncritically for criticism to be effective. And for all the stress he laid on problem-seeking and problem-solving, he offers no general, philosophical account of problems or solutions—all of which are essential for a full-fledged philosophical elaboration of his views.

The other major shortcoming of Popper’s work is the way it conceives the opposition. Motivated by the dramatic developments in physics during the first quarter of the twentieth century, Popper fashioned his anti-foundationalist vision of science to combat foundationalist tendencies in the philosophy of science, especially those of the positivists. This foundationalism boasted an articulation of real empirical scientific accomplishment devoid of an uncriticized empirically given foundation. Today, foundationalism as such is, from a serious philosophical perspective, a matter of the past. The groundbreaking works of Sellars, Wittgenstein and Quine during the 1950’s and 60’s have rendered it a philosophical myth—‘The Myth of the Given’, as they dubbed it. The most serious challenge to