PREFACE

After three centuries of uninterrupted progress in the natural sciences, we still face the dilemma of the coexistence of the two "books": the book of Nature and books of Sacred Scripture. Although we conceive of both nature and sacred texts (not just the Bible) as books to be interpreted, the relationship between these books and their presumed authors has changed considerably.

This second volume of *The Sparks of Randomness* seeks to show why the very notion of revealed Word or revealed Scripture can be understood only if it is atheistic; that is, if its content is not inferred from a priori knowledge of its Author and what He had in mind when creating Nature or Scripture. In the final analysis, what do we mean by a book whose providential Author is supposed to be the Creator of the universe and Sovereign over time, history, and human salvation?

With regard to science as a method for deciphering the book of Nature, things are quite clear today: since the time of Bacon, Descartes, and Spinoza, hardly anyone has delved into theology, whether of the ancient Greeks or of the scriptural monotheisms, in pursuit of the laws of nature. (This, incidentally, is what has made scientific knowledge more efficacious.) And just as we do not delve into theology to look for an author of the book of Nature, neither do we mine the sacred texts of other traditions—the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Laws of Manu, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Tao, and others. These texts have no identified author to stand alongside the mythical characters whose adventures provide the frame of their narratives, poems, and laws. This is precisely why they are "sacred" for those who accept them as such, as revealed or inspired, in the sense of sources of inspiration. In particular, in this volume I demonstrate that the traditions of reading the Talmud and kabbalah are a compound of multiple interpretations, to the point that the issue of the intentions of the presumed author or authors becomes quite irrelevant.

Seen from this perspective, prophetic revelation must be studied as an anthropological phenomenon, like shamanism and divinatory practices, and not as a problem of theology (and one

that happens to be quite insoluble). As for the inspired character of prophetic Scripture today, in a world without prophets (aside from "madmen and children," as the Talmud puts it), it depends on whether and how the text inspires its readers. "Inspired word" may have two different meanings, depending on whether the source of inspiration is someone—a person who speaks or inspires another person—or something—an impersonal object or event, a specific experience from which one draws inspiration. Only the latter case seems to survive today.

In the chapters that follow we will conduct a dialogue between these two books, Scripture and Nature, as we read them today, one next to another, independent of their presumed author or authors, human or divine; we will not set aside the history of earlier readings, however. To the extent that understanding them implies putting them into perspective, here too we cannot turn the past into a clean slate.

First we shall examine how the concepts of life and knowledge evolved into those currently entertained by biology and the cognitive sciences. In this context, the question of a genealogy of ethics necessarily arises in a new mode. At the point of tangency between science and ethics we encounter the question of perfection: the objective of science is to discover and understand the structures of reality, to know the nature of things as they are; whereas ethics proposes to act on reality and modify the nature of beings and things, in pursuit of a greater good—even if there is no consensus about what the greater good might be. For Spinoza, reality and perfection were the same thing. But this did not keep him from conducting an ethical inquiry in search of the paths leading to the greatest perfection. How are we to understand that reality, though perfect, is nevertheless perfectible? Superimposed on our intuition of a nature that is perfect, in that it could not have been any different in its infinite totality, is our specifically human experiences of the finite and of desire, to which we give the evocative but problematic designations "glory," "dignity," "happiness," and "freedom." We will devote more than one page to a study of the tensions among these intuitions and experiences, all of them equally real.

The emergence of the subject is tackled from the perspective of the mind-body problem. The implications of a radical monism are taken as far as possible, analyzed in light of the questions raised by theories of action and by the emergence of different degrees of intentionality in the special physical systems of the brains of human beings and other primates.

Several changes and revolutions divide the science of the seventeenth century from that of our own days. One of the most important changes, often ignored, has to do with the status of the possible. Pascal and Fermat, who invented the calculus of probabilities, operationalized the reality of the possible. Since then it has penetrated ever deeper into our ways of thought and has spread to almost every scientific discipline, though not without creating new problems. These problems often take the form of paradoxes in the daily uses of statistics and probability. Our relationship to the unknown future, the time of history, is modified when it becomes a quantitative estimate of odds and risks. By the same token, though, we are returned with even greater force to the problematic nature of this reality of the possible, which nevertheless remains quite unreal; and also to our experiences of time and of what Spinoza refers to as an "aspect of eternity."

We end with what could be an introductory exposition of the vehicles and supports, both physical and intellectual, of the hermeneutical traditions of the Talmud, Midrash, and kabbalah.

Here we may see preconditions or warnings, which can be useful for avoiding certain misunderstandings when we study these texts. The notion of the atheism of Scripture will then appear to be less paradoxical than expected.

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I would like to thank Maurice Olender for our fruitful exchanges, from which this book, like the previous volume, benefited.