



Aaron W. Hughes. *Rethinking Jewish Philosophy: Beyond Particularism and Universalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 170 pp.

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Rethinking Jewish Philosophy: Beyond Particularism and Universalism, by Professor Aaron W. Hughes, primarily engages with the question of whether Jewish philosophy is a misnomer, or if it is a pursuit worthy of serious consideration.

In addition to the introduction ‘Occupation,’ there are six chapters in the book; ‘Impossibilities,’ ‘Irreconcilability,’ ‘Kaddish,’ ‘Authoritarianism,’ ‘Rosenzweig’s Patient,’ and ‘Beyond.’ The introduction leads the reader to the definition of Jewish philosophy and the various terms which give it meaning. Hughes seems to be highly critical of the adjective ‘Jewish’ as applied to any field of study, including mathematics, physics and sociology. Can these fields of study be done in a Jewish way, or is the aforesaid adjective irrelevant to such subjects? Inspired by the French theorist, Jacques Derrida, Hughes deals with a deconstruction of Jewish philosophy – and its apparent oscillation between particularism and universalism. The argument brought forward is that meaning does not arise from fixed differences but is produced and performed in ways that are consistently partial and provisional through *différance*, whereby differential meanings are endlessly deferred. At any point in time, a term can simultaneously mean anything and nothing at all. This frame of thinking is extended to Jewish philosophy.

Hughes asks the question: Does Jewish philosophy use universal methods to articulate Judaism’s particularity, or does it justify Judaism’s particularity with appeals to illuminating the universal? The primary contention is that Jewish philosophy might as well be a category error in which a property is ascribed to something which might not have that specific attribute. According to Hughes, Jewish philosophy needs to be rethought, if not actually given a different name.

For Hughes, Jewish philosophy deals with the issue of Jewish peoplehood, while at the same time extending the question, “how does Jewish philosophy produce a particular kind of Judaism?” Throughout the text, he addresses the difficulty in conceptualising Jewish philosophy by considering the varied perspectives of Jewish thinkers across history, including the Andalusians Saadya Gaon and Maimonides to Mendelssohn and Levinas in the modern period. Gilian Rose, by contrast, thinks that there can be no such thing as “Jewish Philosophy.” Similarly, there is no Jewish

theology (*logos-theos*) or logic of God since the Torah and Talmud, the Written Law and the Oral Law yield no *tertium comparationis*. Modern philosophy is an even less suitable candidate for comparison (Rose, 1993).

In the chapter 'Impossibilities,' Hughes provides a general introduction to the issues that have beset the study known as Jewish philosophy. First and foremost, there must be a distinction made between what can be constructed as Judaism, and what cannot be. Hughes's main argument is that there is no identity without ambiguity. Here, a cognisance comes to the fore; while Judaism and philosophy can never truly be reconciled, its separation is also never complete. At its most fundamental, it seems to be the case that philosophy has been used by Jewish philosophers (in and of itself a contestable term) to imagine a Judaism that is compatible with the societies they find themselves in. We would do well to remember the conditions of the Frankfurter *Judengasse*, (1492-1811) where "corporatism" was commonplace. Historian Howard M. Sachar points out that at the time, Christian rulers allowed Jews to control their own autonomous corporations if they paid a hefty collective tax or assizes. My reading is that these conditions inevitably created a sense of cognitive dissonance - of both inclusion and exclusion - as being dictated by rulers of a different creed (Sachar, 1977). One can even make the claim that such desire for compatibility is predicated upon an insecurity, that is of always being seen as either "not enough" or as a "perpetual outsider." From here, Hughes touches on the prevalent distinction between Hellenistic and Hebraic thought, with the former dealing with rationality for its own sake while the latter an expression of a commitment to Commandment and the establishment of an ethical life. Hughes also points out that philosophy was seen as the yardstick to measure all forms of tradition and to decide what was most authentic (often by external criteria) and what was not. He argued that Jewish philosophers have rearranged the past to give it a "different face," making it conform to their own construction of what it ought to be. This past then becomes the touchstone for a construction of problems to be dealt with in the present.

The next chapter, 'Irreconcilability,' touches on the difficulty of attaining stability between the two concepts of Hughes's focus, Judaism and philosophy, observing them as "polarized identities for which we have created hermetically distinct categories" (p. 28). The subsections of this chapter engage with the varied thoughts of Jewish thinkers. "Rosenzweig's Rejection" describes how the German theologian rejects the universal tendencies of philosophy, in favour of the inherent structure and dynamic of the particular. This dynamic stems from a wholly Judaic vantage point. Moreover, Rosenzweig argues that the Jews must be rooted in themselves (*Verwurzelung im eigenen Selbst*), so that that which closes them off from the world enables them to anticipate ultimate redemption, and in so doing permits them to represent to the rest of the world (the universal), the aspirations which global Jewry must pursue. 'Mendelssohn's Creation' explores Moses Mendelssohn's (1729-1786) defence of Judaism, articulating an answer to the question of how a Jew could philosophise (thought to be a universal propensity) while remaining committed to the tradition of his forefathers. The other subsections include 'Hermann Cohen and the Gift of the Jews,' (the necessity of Judaism as a religion of reason, *die Religion der Vernunft*; a true monotheistic faith) and 'Cohen's Disciple: Emmanuel Levinas,' which touches on the idea of ethics as first philosophy (*éthique comme philosophie premier*).

Levinas (1906–1995) focuses on what he deemed to be the higher priorities of ethics – our obligations for others in our face-to-face encounters with them – which simultaneously enables us to have genuine care for all humanity.

In Chapter 3, 'Kaddish,' Hughes rejects the rhetoric of authenticity and its concomitant politics of nostalgia which has plagued much of Jewish philosophy. The attempt to uncover Judaism in its pristine, timeless and/or original form is a futile act, according to Hughes, as it could also be deemed to be an enforcement of a particular rationalist agenda imagined as having existed in a non-existent past, with the hope that such foundations are pursued by future generations. This has made Jewish philosophy an object of occupation, whereby various institutional forces attempt to mould the tradition in their own images, and for their own pursuits. It is thus a question of authority – who gets to determine authenticity and its expression? To further understand such demands, Hughes turns to Ibn Gabirol (1021–1058) and Judah Abravanel (d. 1521) – two thinkers considered to be outliers to the tradition that we come to know as “medieval Jewish philosophy.” Hughes mentions that although both individuals are grouped within the canon of Jewish philosophy, their presence within it has been contentious. Why is this so? Ibn Gabirol's *Yanbu' al-hayah* (translated into Latin as *Fons Vitae*) was written in Arabic, while Judah Abravanel's *Dialoghi d'Amaore* was authored in Italian. However, the medium of expression is not the point of contention here. According to Hughes, for some, (I am inclined to call them “puritans”) the inclusion of both thinkers within the canon of Jewish philosophy is problematic because there is no real attempt to reconcile Judaism and philosophy within their works. Moreover, both thinkers made no real reference to rabbinical texts, and/or other Jewish sources. To add further intrigue, the aforesaid texts were primarily written for a non-Jewish audience. In *Yanbu' al-hayah*, Ibn Gabirol's philosophy was not shackled by any form of dogmatic theology, while Abravanel's *Dialoghi d'Amaore* was a treatise on love that was intimately connected to literary interests of humanism and the aesthetic sensibilities of Renaissance artists. An argument has also been made that Abravanel had renounced Judaism and embraced the Christian faith in either Naples or Rome. As such, the inclusion of his name within the pantheon of Jewish thinkers remains a contentious one. Nevertheless, since both Ibn Gabirol and Judah Abravanel were ethnically Jewish, their thinking has been subsumed within the canon of Jewish philosophy. For Hughes, it seems to be the case that the sole criterion for their inclusion into the field is one of circumstance; of birth and identity politics. The lack of Jewish sources can now be made to indicate their resistance towards a “particularist urge,” bringing further attention to the fragility of the rhetoric of authenticity mentioned prior.

In the chapter titled 'Authoritarianism,' Hughes delineates the differences between the particularist aspect of Jewish philosophy and that of its universalism. Here, he touches on the rationalist sensibilities of nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft de Judentums*, clarifying the need of the time for Jews to be assimilationist – modernising Judaism in hopes of emancipation and ultimately paving the way for Jews to be accepted as full Europeans. The particular in this regard is the context to which Jews were living at the time – a period of self-definition – while the universal relates to ideas within a modern framing of Judaism which could be tolerated by European society writ large, if not accepted in its totality. Hughes points out:

Representing the perceived synthesis between Athens and Jerusalem, medieval thinkers were subsequently modernized and liberalized, and became the keys to unlock Jewish emancipation in Europe. And thus, was born the medieval Jewish philosophical canon, out of which would gradually emerge something that we can today refer to as a canon of modern Jewish philosophy. (p. 67)

In the chapter titled 'Rosenzweig's Patient,' Hughes discusses the ideas of Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929); observed as a defender of Jewish particularism (as discussed briefly in chapter 2) during a time of the normalisation of Jews in Europe. This "normalisation" refers to the integration of Jews into European life, and a steady tolerance of presence in the day-to-day. Hughes points out that Rosenzweig attempted to redirect the trajectory of Jewish life by giving due emphasis to Jewish *différance*, "and by removing Jews from the shackles of history in order to locate or embed them within eternity" (p. 86). In his magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig brings forth a system of thought that seeks to provide a comprehensive account of the universe – what he terms "the All" – which includes the individual's place and role within it. "The All" is in its purest sense, unknowable. However, the only idea that can be certain within such a system is that individuals exist within its midst ("The All"). Therefore, difference – in terms of character and conduct, social circumstances, and outlook – is crucial because it is what enables the single human being to grasp "The All" in his or her idiosyncratic particularity. Hughes iterates Rosenzweig's point that within previous systems of thought – from medieval Aristotelianism to German idealism – there was a tendency to flatten differences. Particularity was sacrificed, as it were, on the altar of abstract universal forms. According to the author of *The Star of Redemption*, Judaism becomes necessary to the successful practice of philosophy because it is the embodiment of the particular, par excellence. Rosenzweig reasons that the universal needs the particular to sustain itself, thus dislodging it from its own universalising tendencies. It must be noted that the particularism promoted by Rosenzweig has met with many detractors, who were/are concerned with its exclusivity. The possibility of the reification of the Jewish people "potentially risks nourishing a proto-racist and atavistic nationalism" (p. 87). However, Rosenzweig was more focused on resuscitating the study of his beloved faith among his contemporaries, while bringing forth the notion of an ancient Judaism (*das Altjudentum*), in which the Torah and the outside world were not at odds with one another – knowing no opposition nor conflict. It comes as no surprise that he was highly critical of political Zionism because it was a movement which sought to normalise Jews by lodging them firmly within the folds of history – of past, present, future.

In the final chapter titled 'Beyond,' Hughes contends that we must do away with the overused term of "reconciliation" between Judaism and philosophy. Again, he uses Derrida to dismantle binary thinking "by showing that traditionally constructed antipodes are ultimately embroiled in each other's history" (p. 125). In the final analysis, we observe a recognition of the fluid nature of Jewish philosophy – that is of a "no beyond, no place of authentic Hellenic or Hebraic thought" (p. 125). For Hughes, the boundaries between Judaism and philosophy (or any study for that matter), are

never natural markers, even though they are usually thought of and portrayed as such. A further example he provides is that of boundaries between religions. Like those between countries, boundaries (or barriers) between religions are constructed and imposed, and are thus artificial (even though to adherents, it might not seem to be the case).

Reading this text makes it abundantly clear that we are engaging in a topic that is not only controversial, but complicated. The discourse associated with Jewish philosophy has largely been one that is passive, often articulated as conservative responses to non-Jewish ideas and contexts. Hughes contends that we should return to a set of meta-questions, that is, “Jewish meta-philosophy” that permits reflections on the task, means, and ends of philosophising in a truly “Jewish manner,” originating from within, and not as a response towards external pressures. The conclusion reached is that Jewish philosophy is amorphous, with a recognition of the porous borders between originality and imitation. What makes this book appealing is that it is written in an approachable manner and introduces readers to a plethora of ideas by diverse Jewish voices. If there is any real criticism of the book, the last chapter could have been expanded further as it does leave the reader somewhat “hanging.” For those interested in Jewish philosophy as a field of inquiry, *Rethinking Jewish Philosophy: Beyond Particularism and Universalism* is indeed a terrific starting point.

References

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